

NAMELESS PLACES



EDITED BY GERALD W. PAGE

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Continuing the Arkham House tradition, this anthology offers the discerning reader of the macabre no less than twenty-seven newly published stories by twenty-three authors, both established and new, exploring a wide and wondrous range of modern fantastic writing. The traditional and the off-trail are represented in a collection certain to appeal to the devotee and general reader alike.

Ramsey Campbell is represented by two stories, *The Last Hand* and *The Christmas Present*—the last an adaptation of a work broadcast on the BBC. Carl Jacobi offers the intriguing *Chameleon Town*, and Denys Val Baker purveys horror in a commonplace setting in *Before the Event*. Robert Aickman, in *The Real Road to the Church*, and E. Hoffmann Price, in *Selene*, combine the occult with the ordinary in stories as thought-provoking as they are different.

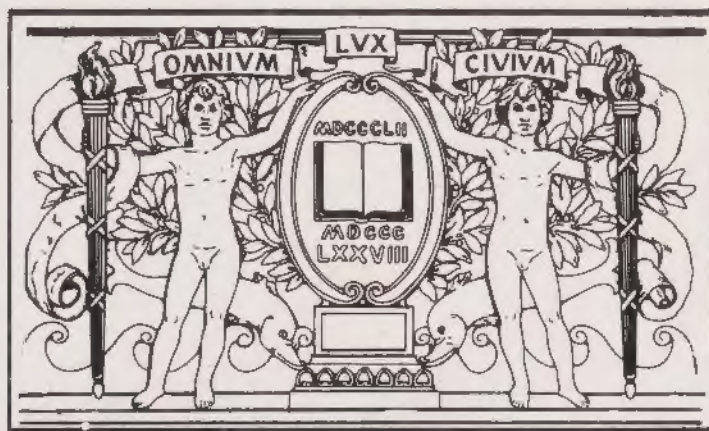
Lovecraftian themes are developed in A. A. Attanasio's nouvelle *Glimpses*, which signals the Arkham House debut of an outstanding young author, and in stories by Lin Carter, Walter C. DeBill, and Joseph Payne Brennan. Equally Lovecraftian, though in a uniquely different manner, is Gary Myers' sly *The Gods of Earth*, certain to delight readers of his *The House of the Worm*.

Thomas Burnett Swann makes his Arkham House debut with *Night of the Unicorn*, a rare venture into shorter fiction, and Robert E. Gilbert offers a minor masterpiece of psychological insight in *Walls of Yellow Clay*. Brian Ball's *The Warlord of Kul Satu* will satisfy the seeker after horror, while Scott Edelstein's two contributions will enhance his reputation as a satirist. Joseph F. Pumilia's *Dark Vintage* advances an ingenious—and frightening—new concept.

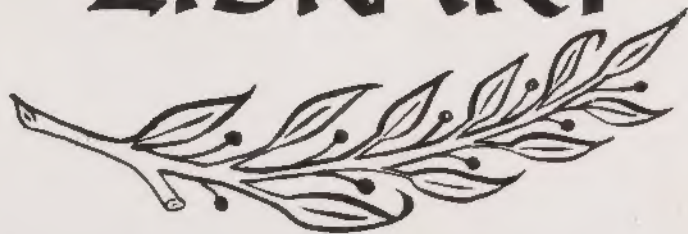
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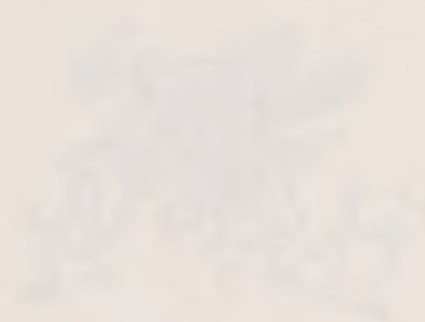
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Gerald W. Page



ARKHAM HOUSE

Sauk City
1975

Wisconsin

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By April R. Derleth and Walden W. Derleth

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 75-2525
International Standard Book Number 0-87054-073-4

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Foreword

The purpose for which *Nameless Places* was conceived was simply the gathering of a number of never before published macabre stories, and in that respect the anthology can be considered a continuation of the series of Arkham House collections edited by the late August Derleth from 1962 to 1971. As Derleth described one of these, *Over the Edge*, the present book is, "in effect a grab-bag of stories which belong in the domain of fantasy; they range from ghostly tales to science fiction."

Yet there are some interruptions in the continuation. The most obvious is the lack of many familiar Arkham House contributors; this is also the most inevitable. Most of the Lovecraft stories that debuted in Arkham House pages were largely the work of August Derleth. The final stories of many deceased contributors who graced recent collections have now seen publication and the remaining manuscripts of many others do not merit print. Several writers who have contributed to Arkham House in the past would have liked to do so this outing but were unable to because of the press of other commitments. Yet *Nameless Places* can boast a respectable number of Arkham House favorites, among them Brian Lumley, Joseph Payne Brennan, Gary Myers, Denys Val Baker, Ramsey Campbell, Carl Jacobi and E. Hoffmann Price. They are joined by fantasy veterans such as Thomas Burnett Swann and Stephen Goldin, making initial contributions to Arkham House; such relative newcomers as Scott Edelstein, A. A. Attanasio and Arthur Byron Cover—who have established themselves as major new writers in the field—; and some writers who make the first or one of their first appearances in print.

With one or two exceptions, these stories were written within the past five years. That these stories were written over such a period and only now find a home demonstrates an interesting paradox: that many writers—particularly new, young writers—are developing an increasing interest in fantasy as a mode of expression despite fantasy's traditional paucity of viable markets. This anthology was gathered with no unifying theme in mind, yet it is not unfair to say that *Nameless Places* offers a fairly comprehensive picture of the state of fantasy and fantasy writing at the threshold of the last quarter of the twentieth century. We confess our bias, of course, but allowing for all our prejudice, we don't feel it inappropriate to say that what we find here inspires us, at least, to both optimism and enthusiasm.

—Gerald W. Page

Atlanta, Georgia
February 23, 1975

**NAMELESS
PLACES**

Glimpses

A. A. ATTANASIO

The mysterious and indecipherable books from the forgotten people before the Ramessids period that the early myths want to tell us so much about were probably not books at all. Who can say what stone artifact discovered at Coptos is not itself some ancient body of knowledge to which we have long ago lost the key?

[Birch *Zeitschrift* 1871 pp. 61-2]

You tell me you understand no word of the first tongue spoken by the deities, no word good or bad. There is, as it were, a wall about it that none may climb. For it is a language that remembers no past and awaits no future. It is a tongue that murders the air.

[trans. by Maspero and Lang in *The World's Desire* from Papyrus Anastasi, I pl. 1. i. pl. X 1. iv.]

The Pierced Stone

THE DAY was smoldering at the end of the street when Gene Mirandola stepped down from the tram. The gaslamps were already lighted. And though it was April the wind that groped among the tangle of streets and alleys was cold. All day Gene had been experiencing an unreasonable tension, as if he were under surveillance. Try as he had, there was no way to alleviate the anxiety.

He stood for a moment at the corner to look about him. From a rooftop a boy was throwing crumbs into the air, fishing the sky. Around him, flocks of pigeons massed like a black fountain, blowing down and swirling up again.

Gene looked behind him and then crossed the street to buy the *Times* from the crone who perpetually waited there in front of Little Rose Cafe. After he purchased the paper, she squinted long at the pence in her hand despising it, perhaps, for being a pence, and then stuffed it in her apron pocket, sucking her lips a little further into her mousehole.

With cigar in his teeth and nose to the wind, Gene walked toward the twilight, feeling even more intensely now the eyes of some unseen observer. That old woman, Ocarina, mother of murderers and madmen, Ocarina, whose neck was a chicken leg, she was there every night, rain or stars, squatting on the orange crate—she never intimidated him before. Why now were her eyes so terrible? Why were her crab's hands, her small bulk on the crate, so ominous tonight?

Momentarily overwhelmed by his imagination, Gene made his way down the street conscious of the curtains in the dust-stained storefront windows being drawn aside and the movements behind them. As he passed through the black iron gate and down the musky alley that led to the courtyard where his flat was, he struggled in his apprehension to remind himself that such unwarranted fear was incommensurable with his experience: after all, he found himself thinking as he groped for his latch key, a man of thirty-two with the responsible but not at all consequential job of chief clerk at a small publishing firm has no reason for paranoia.

Gene shut the door firmly behind him and climbed the stairs two at a step to the top floor. Already in the warmth of the building, the invisible menace diminished. It was unnatural for it to be so cold in April. And now, as the door swung open into his awkward, cherished rooms containing his familiar shelves, he was perfectly willing to believe that the weather had been responsible for his anxiety.

After a change of clothes and with a snifter of brandy in his hand, Gene's stubborn fear seemed small, and he looked out his window at the children in the alley setting fires in ash-barrels and the old men with their pushcarts loaded with fruit and vegetables and empty crates clanking away on iron wheels over cobblestones.

He settled comfortably in his large overstuffed chair, staring into the night. It was the dark of the moon. Sleep was opening in him like a blossom, and he was drifting toward it. But his drowsiness gave way gradually to a discomfort in his throat. It felt numb, and his tongue was twisting in his mouth, moving on its own. Gene was alarmed and sat bolt upright as his tongue forced itself between his lips and wagged nervously in the air, curling and flapping. Leaping to his feet, he cried out loud. His tongue relaxed, but he was shaking. He downed the rest of his brandy and after a few minutes went to bed and tried to pray. After calming down, he felt his mouth open and his tongue move. He couldn't control his breathing, and the whisper that forced itself through his teeth was not his own—*Gene, listen to me. I am a voice that has been too high for your ears for a long time. Where do you suppose I have been since you last saw me?*

O Christ! Gene thought. His breath returned to him in short gasps. O Christ! I know that voice. It's my uncle. But, how long has it been since he died?

Gene Mirandola was travelling south. It was night, and from the train window only his own round, fleshy face stared back. He had been in the midst of a long and tiring conversation with his travelling companion, an unknown businessman that circumstance had put in the same compartment. Somehow, Gene's mind had wandered to what he couldn't even now recall, and he had lost grasp of the dialogue. As he returned his gaze to his fellow passenger, he was not at all surprised to see that the man looked perplexed. But just as he was about to apologize, the stranger said, "You know, that's a very curious caricature, there." The man indicated the paper on which Gene had been absent-mindedly doodling.

"O, I wasn't paying any attention. I—" Gene cut himself short when he looked down at the writing tablet in his lap. There, staring back at him from among an intricate weave of figure-eights, circles and mandalas, was a remarkably deft drawing of his Uncle Armand Saadi. A wall of blackness that had until then obscured whole regions of thought suddenly gave way, and Gene remembered vividly that night several months previous when he had felt possessed by this very uncle. Since then he had learned, through other relatives, a few facts about his uncle

(that, indeed, he was still alive and living not far from where Gene, on his business trip, was heading), but he had, until now, dismissed his previous experience completely.

Gene sat numb for a long moment, unable to remove his eyes from the seemingly too-familiar face that peered through his doodles. At last he looked up at his companion, who by now had lost interest and was leisurely engaged in his local trades-weekly. The stranger's nonchalance about the incident grated against Gene's excitement. The compartment that they occupied seemed foolishly small and trivial to be housing all of the implications that a few minutes of idle sketching had produced. Gene's life was changed utterly—altering even as he thought about it. Chance could not explain it. Coincidence was no longer enough.

He tried to remember everything he could about his uncle. He knew that Armand had been an historian of science for a while, and that he had a passionate interest in the paintings of Manet—but these were trifles. What was it that consumed him about his uncle—that strange man he barely knew, that rare figure in his life with whom he shared not even blood?

Even after a week of business in Caernarvon, Gene Mirandola was still experiencing the peculiar attraction to his uncle. It had become only too clear to him that the matter would not resolve itself, and he made plans to take the time to pay a personal visit to Armand Saadi.

Following his relatives' best recollections and the uncertain knowledge of the local post service, Gene found himself on an overnight journey by horseback into the mountainous country of Radnor Forest. The season was agreeable to the trek, and the ride turned into a pleasant aside for what had been a week of exacting and tedious labor. The countryside was rustic, even wild, despite the fact that he was able to make most of his way on the well-defined northwest highway that runs in that area from Llandudno to Carmarthon. It amazed him that he should know so little about an uncle that had apparently influenced him deeply or that he would be willing to travel at such inconvenience to visit this man he knew only by acquaintance.

Mirandola stayed overnight at the turnpike house in Maroc, and early the next morning left the highway for the short but unmapped ride to his uncle's house. The forest here was particularly thick, and shortly

after the turnoff, Gene regretted not leaving his horse at the inn. The trees were uncommonly swollen and overgrown with moss and mushroom. Overhead the branches had grown so dense as to cut off most light and to filter green what little shone through. Underfoot was a tangle of thick roots and growths, and Gene found himself leading his steed most of the nine miles north to his destination.

It was well after noon when the first landmark of his uncle's estate greeted him. It was an old stone well, obviously just recovered from some terribly long period of disrepair. Gene stopped to rest there momentarily and, more for idle pleasure than necessity, prepared to draw some water. He pulled up on the new rope that was slung through the rusted iron pulley and continued to pull for a considerable time before he gave up in exasperation. The rope was endless, he thought as he watched the yards of it that he had withdrawn fly back into the darkness. Curiously, he dropped a large stone down the well, but the water gave out no bottom for as long as he cared to wait. Besides, just over the knoll was his uncle's place, and certainly there would be interesting enough things to do there than to wait on a bottomless well.

Gene led his horse over the knoll and then stopped, dismissing the strange well, forgetting the tiring walk. A stone tower, not a full three stories, stood among the thick forest. It leaned heavily to one side, its walls obviously just remortared to salvage the structure from ruin. It was such an unexpected sight, that queer little building huddled on a mountain slope, that Gene would have stood staring at it indefinitely had not a figure emerged from the door. It waved him closer, and, of course, it was his Uncle Armand. But not as he remembered him. No, not even as he had so deftly but unconsciously portrayed him a week earlier on the train from London. His uncle was more wan, more haggard and sallow than he had expected.

"Ah, at last. At last," his uncle greeted after Gene secured the horse. Armand clasped a heavy and amiable arm about his nephew. "I thought you were never coming."

"You knew?" Gene muttered, certainly not taken fully aback that his uncle had shared his unusually persistent attraction.

"Yes, of course I knew. I've been calling you," Armand claimed, ushering the young man into his house.

Inside, it was even more obvious what great labor his uncle had

undertaken in restoring the timeless tower. On the floor was an intricately woven Minoan prayer rug. A large round table of oak with several cumbersome chairs, suitably antiquated, occupied most of the ground floor. Over half of the circular wall had been converted to bookshelves and held, what at first glance seemed, a disproportionate number of worn Arabic texts. The remainder of the wall space was taken up with several paintings (one remarkable balcony scene by Manet showing an old woman with a face as vapid as the long moon in the background) and unusual stuffed animals: a shark's mouth displaying several rows of teeth, the skin of a large, white cat, and the head of a fierce-looking ram. At the center of the table a dozen or so stone rubrics were arranged around a decanter of whiskey.

Armand seated his nephew, but he remained standing, aloof. After a brief period of exchanging cordialities, he left the room and returned momentarily with a square black stone the size of a liter cube. When Gene moved to touch it, Armand stopped him with a sharp command. "You must be very careful about everything you do here," the uncle told his nephew. "Fancy your coming two days out of your way to see me. You don't know me except maybe by reputation. But I know who you are. I know your deepest secret fears. How could I know such things unless I were a sorcerer? And if indeed you are in a sorcerer's house, it would be wise to be very careful about everything you do."

Gene sat back in his chair and seemed to think this over, but he was quite certain in his mind that the man opposite him was no ordinary man. He began to wish that he had not been so impulsive about coming here.

"Yes, it is too bad you are the one that had to come," Armand said. "Believe me, it would not have been a good thing for whomever providence chose—but I had no idea it would be you."

Gene felt his anxiety like a cold finger between his shoulders. He knew that it would be impossible to escape now, and that knowledge gave him a queasy feeling in his stomach.

"Ah, but you're right," his uncle continued. "All this chatter is making you uncomfortable, so I shall address the purpose of your visit directly."

"I am an old man who has undergone a long agony, and I am very impatient for my death. But before I indulge in that last and most

somber denial, I must dispatch an old and pressing promise. Really, I am no different from you, except that the years and my fate have set me apart. So I can understand how what I must ask you to do for me will sound strange. I cannot possibly make my purpose fully clear to you, but I shall try to help you to understand as much as your destiny in this matter will allow."

Gene felt sick at heart because it was now apparent that the old man had not called him here to teach him but merely to have him do a favor.

Armand Saadi sensed even this and said, "What little I have to tell you is more than you can learn living another thousand years in your current fashion. Don't be distracted by thoughts of personal gain, for I repeat, you have been chosen for a distressing fate. Perhaps what little I can tell you now will be of some condolence later."

The nephew tried to control his alarm, understanding that there was no escape as long as his uncle stood between him and the door, and whatever salvation there might be would only reveal itself to a cool-headed mind.

"Yes, try to remain calm, and look closely at this," Armand said, pointing to the cube. "This is what the Arabs would say embodies *kiblah*, direction, for it shows the way to true knowledge. When I first uncovered it at a bazaar in Khartoum that is what the merchant told me it was. He also said that it had been found in the desert years ago and was considered a token of ill-luck, as any such object that probably was discarded by a caravan would be. So, I was able to purchase it cheaply. It wasn't until some years later that a good friend of mine, who is an archeologist in America, was able to tell me more about it by translating this old Arabic inscription."

Gene scrutinized the Arabic scrawl.

"*Fee mibrabeh bejanib el-bahr tantazir ahlam al-maiet Cthulhu*," his uncle read. "It literally translates: *In his temple by the sea, dead Cthulhu's dream waits*. My American friend assumed from the use of the barbarous name Cthulhu that this relatively recent black stone which is maybe two thousand years old, houses an older artifact related to a much more ancient cult. Following his lead, I learned this secret."

Armand gently separated the black cube into two parts revealing a round stone with a hole in it, rather like a donut. On either side of this stone were inscriptions impressed in a sytle like cuneiform. Gene ran

his fingers over them and noticed that on the periphery of the stone a snake was raised, encircling the entire wheel and biting its tail on one side.

"That snake is an uroboros," Armand said. "It's a symbol whose meaning I cannot fully exhaust, other than to say that it represents the cyclic pattern of the cosmos itself. But I can tell you about the nature of the stone. It is a hole!" Armand put several fingers through it, and Gene wanted to laugh out loud at his uncle's pious regard for a hole.

"You think this is funny because you don't understand the nature of holes at all," his uncle said. "This hole here is filled with air, but holes aren't necessarily empty. Besides, what does 'empty' mean? All that we can really say is that whatever a hole is filled with, it must not be the same as the substance in which it is embedded.

"Ah, well if that is so, then aren't all 'empty' spaces holes in reference to some framework? What about gaps in thoughts? Are the conceptual contents of all holes the same?

"You now might begin to see that each person's universe, both physical and conceptual, is entirely permeated by holes. There are holes all around and through us. We are living in a world of holes. As a matter of fact, holes cover more space than anything else. It seems strange, then, that all of the words we have for holes refer to a break in the continuity of a substance, such as aperture, bore, cave, cavern, cavity, cleft, crater, enclave, excavation, fissure, gap, grotto, hole, hollow, orifice, puncture, pit, pocket, slit, tunnel and tube. All of these words come from Indoeuropean rootwords which refer to a hole as something created, and not as a separate entity, like *beu*, *bher*, *ghei*, *kel*, *keu*, *peue*, *wer*, meaning to cover, to open, to poke or push something into, to punch, to bend.

"Apparently, this configuration in space, like the concept of zero, is relatively recent. But what do people truly feel about holes? Why did artists put holes in Luristan bronzes three thousand years ago? It is because various configurations of a hole and of holes focus energies and can tell secrets. Holes are the language used by entities beyond causality. By this magic we may arise and speak with spirits without knowing ourselves. For, to men with a knowledge of corners and holes, nothing is ever empty."

"And this particular hole is . . . important?" Gene ventured, indicated the ancient stone.

"Of course. But holes can mean nothing significant until you understand that man is merely a flash in the pan compared to what older entities dwelt here first. Those Old Ones, you may learn, still have much influence on this planet though now they are not in the spaces we know but *between* them. Holes can lead to them. The nature of their names and characters would be meaningless to you, except perhaps for that Entity to Whom this specific hole is sacred. And that is *Yog-Sothoth*, the All-In-One and the One-In-All, the Guardian and Master of all passageways, of all holes. Truly, though, He is nameless, beginningless, endless. How the Dead are drawn after Him! Oh, and how terrible the fate of the living who lucklessly are found in His presence and sail without shadow toward the pyres of His sun."

Gene again grew nervous, feeling uncertain about what was happening.

"Listen, young man, you are not yet ready to understand these matters. I have called you here to do me a favor, and that is, quite simply, to deliver this hole to London. Here is the address."

The crisp, labored hand of his uncle read, *Marc Souvate, 43 Caton St., Lansbury, London.*

"He is an adept in these matters," Armand went on, "and if you are at all curious when you meet with him, he may tell you more about this stone. But now you must leave, even though you have just arrived. This is a place of much power, and if you are found here by night, I would have little hopes for your continued well-being."

This was the opportunity that Gene was looking for, and he grabbed it. As quickly as he could without seeming too impolite, he took the stone and mounted his horse. His uncle pointed out a shorter way back to Maroc, advising Gene to avoid the well on his property as it was also a hole sacred to *Yog-Sothoth* and therefore a danger to him with the sacred stone. Gene took his uncle's advice and rode swiftly along the narrow trail into the forest, glad in his heart to be returning to a natural world.

He tried to kick the gun under the oak table, but he couldn't find his

foot. There was blood on the Minoan prayer rug, and the stone rubrics had been scattered when the body collapsed.

He moved to the window to wait for someone to come. It was night, and there was nothing to do.

The decanter of whiskey was still on the table where he had left it. He wanted a drink, but his hand was not there. It was dangling from the table. He went over and looked at the mess that had been a head. It disturbed him, and already he wanted to go back. Was there any way to go back? It was so messy, he doubted anyone could ever find all of the pieces.

He looked up at the painting by Manet. That woman there, locked on that balcony—her fate was as terrible as his.

He stood for a long time at the window, looking out at the darkness. There was nothing at all to do.

Abruptly, a loud and raucous noise began from behind the knoll. It was the sound of the rusted pulley that drew the rope from the well.

They were coming now.

He felt anxious. It wasn't supposed to turn out this way. It was supposed to be over now. The gun should have done the trick. How could he have suspected otherwise? How could he have known?

The creaking of the pulley became more persistent, and he stared hard into the night. What was going to happen when They came? What would They do?

He backed from the window slowly, though he knew there was no escape.

The Adept

Dr. Marc Souvate, for all that Gene Mirandola could tell, was of indeterminate age. Though his hair, which was absolutely straight and was combed back flat on his head, was jet black and his posture and gait were remarkably loose and agile for a man as tall as he was, Gene could not help but think of the doctor as being quite old. His skin was olive dark and tight to the skull, and his eyes, green like shattered glass, were netted in wrinkles that told of much physical strain. The thin lips, too, were creased deeply. But other than those few signs of age, the man, for all appearances in his eloquent dress and firm resonant voice, could have been thirty.

"Did your uncle tell you anything about the nature of this stone?" Souvate asked. He was sitting on the edge of his baroque desk, his hands lying idly at the sides of the icon and his eyes fixed on it, as if he were not speaking to Gene at all.

"Yes, he did tell me something about its antiquity and, uh, something about older beings."

"The Old Ones."

"Yes, that was it."

"It's a shame he didn't come with you. There's much I have to talk with him about."

"That's too bad," Gene said, lowering his voice. "I just got word this morning—he's dead."

"Oh?" Souvate turned to face Gene. "What happened? Do you know?"

"The notice, quite bluntly, said that he put himself away with a pistol."

Souvate returned his gaze to the stone, as if to ponder Armand's death.

A long period of silence ensued, and Gene, feeling uncomfortable but not willing to depart without more information that might help him to understand his uncle, asked, "What can you tell me about this stone?"

"Nothing that would make much sense to you, I'm afraid."

"Tell me anyway. I must know more."

Souvate remained silent for a moment and then, without looking at Gene said, "This is a talisman. It was given to men by the Great Lord of the Abyss, Nodens, to protect us from our witless creators. It is one of several that we have to insulate us from the prepotent elemental deities. The only other one that I can speak of is the Elder Sign that guards the dream of the water deity. This here is even more powerful, for it holds sway over Time and the Beast therein: the All-In-One and the One-In-All, *Yog-Sothoth*."

Gene made a perplexed move and sat back further into his chair.

"I told you, these words would mean nothing to you," Marc Souvate said. "You are not an initiate, so at most, if I were fain to speak more, these things would be a mythology to you."

"But are these things relative to man? I mean, are these things you and my uncle have talked about as real?"

Souvate put a finger to the side of his nose and grinned slightly. "How can I tell you about reality? You are a businessman, and I am a sorcerer. For you, volume of sales for some book is real. For me, whatever does not need me is real."

"I want to learn more," Gene said, he thought too eagerly.

Souvate smiled broadly, a hint of fang at the corners. "You would have to make a real commitment. I think, perhaps, you are too well into your own conception of the world to have another one opened to you."

As it would be, that was the last that the two men had to do with each other for over a year. Gene left Souvate with the mysterious stone in his roomy but foreboding house near the river and returned to his flat and his job. But, as these things go, his exposure to his uncle and to the recondite Dr. Souvate had a lasting and pressing influence on Gene. Because he had had one glimpse of other, previously unsuspected, horizons, his appreciation of the world no longer fulfilled him, and he found that his work was not gratifying. He knew now in his heart what he had only suspected and rationalized away in his mind, that the universe was vaster and more accessible than any man in his social circles suspected. He realized, too, that he could not live out the rest of his life without at least trying to grasp more of that whole.

And, naturally, after more than a year of compromising with the world of business and his own impulsive curiosity, Gene Mirandola returned to the roomy and foreboding house by the river and called, once again, on Dr. Souvate. And there, in the drawing-room among antiquated furniture, unusual animals and relics from disparate and largely unknown cultures, Gene and the dark doctor settled the arrangements for the young man's apprenticeship.

The details of Mirandola's training are part of another story; those that are familiar with sorcery know those details intimately, and those who are merely curious would fail to appreciate the slow and awkward process by which Gene learned first to forget time, numbers and the alphabet, going on to forgetting the elements, starting with water, proceeding to earth, rising to fire, forgetting fire until everything was continuous again. And only then did his apprenticeship truly begin, with his discovering as if by himself (for such is the way of a true teacher) the nature and heuristic use of henbane, betel, oeanthol, opium, blister-fly and tannis leaf; discovering, next, how to alter the field of force

around the human body in such a way that nerve centers are influenced and valuable visions are generated; and discovering, finally, the secret of holes and the language they speak.

So it came about that Gene Mirandola, instructed by Dr. Souvate, was ready to begin a marvellous quest for knowledge. They met on a prearranged night in the immense caverns that lie partly under the sorcerer's foreboding house by the river. There, in the dark gloom lighted only by a single cool-burning taper, they came upon three large holes, the perimeters of which were marked with worn futhorc inscriptions.

Gene, of course, knew by then that the entire world, indeed the universe, is an intricate manifold of interconnecting holes, some of them blatantly obvious and constant like these three, others invisible and incessantly shifting. All initiates knew of these holes, but only an adept could use them properly. Determining which hole to use necessitated a foreknowledge of where it would take you, and that knowledge precluded logic and was, therefore, available only to an adept. Holes could communicate through space-time, and there were numerous accounts of luckless voyagers who entered into worlds or situations that were biologically disadvantageous or who plummeted through intergalactic voids so vast as to be considered, by all practical values, infinite.

"Now that you have had some glimpse into the nature of things," Souvate told Gene as they stood at the edge of one of the abysses, "you can appreciate what I am going to tell you about myself. Like a good apprentice, you have come here not knowing what task I shall assign you, perfectly willing to fulfill my commands without explanation. Well, because you have been an exceptional pupil, I am going to tell you something few other men know."

Souvate held the taper closer to his face, illuminating his stark, green eyes. "I am a vehicle for the first worshippers of the Great Lord Nodens Whose Presence was last on this planet long before any semblance of man emerged from the Pre-Cambrian slime and Who will return many billions of years from now. Those entities that first worshipped Him, before this earth was even recognizable as a planet, desire nothing more than to be united in His Presence. When He departed and the Old Ones, the entropic deities, emerged, the worshippers began their dread migration through time, utilizing their knowledge of holes to jump

large stretches of time, moving constantly toward that future point when Nodens shall return. Some one and a half million years ago, the worshippers took my body as a host. I am their vehicle, and they direct me on this odyssey through history. From them I have acquired complete mastery of my physical form. I am ageless, capable of regenerating whole segments of my body. But I realize that I am only a tool—a willing servant of Nodens.

"I met your Uncle Armand when I first entered this time period, some fifty-three years previous. In return for his help in establishing me in this historical niche, I gave him knowledge of the Old Ones so that his life would lack nothing. However, instead of merely using that knowledge for his corporeal good, he sought to compound his understanding, and he began to study the nature of holes, that is space-time, the domain of the terrible *Yog-Sothoth*.

"That was sad, because he who seeks the All-In-One will find the One-In-All. But then there is no escape, not even in physical death. Hence, Armand most certainly was taken by *Yog-Sothoth* to serve that Ancient One for eternity in some hideous manner."

"Now, as the stars are right for me to make another leap through time, I am prepared to leave all that I have here behind, but I do not forget that Armand Saadi befriended me. So, I have trained you, and soon you will have the opportunity to both repay me and save your uncle's soul from its unremitting horror."

"This hole that we will enter is going to deliver us to Laguna Cays, a small archipelago south of Chile. On that speck of land is the oldest temple of *Yog-Sothoth* still extant. From there I will depart for the future and my destiny. And also there you will find your uncle's soul and have your chance to redeem it. If you succeed, my actions will go unnoticed, and I shall make good my escape, your uncle's soul will be freed, and you shall return here safely."

Souvate opened the burlap sack he had with him and withdrew the serpent stone that Gene had delivered so long ago. "This, as I have told you, is a talisman against *Yog-Sothoth*. Take it, and do not let it go until you have returned here. It is the only thing which will afford you any protection at all."

Countless questions surged to Gene Mirandola's tongue, but there

was time not even for one. Dr. Souvate, chanting and holding Gene's arm, stepped out into the emptiness.

The adept and his disciple found themselves looking down a black, volcanic beach: old horseshoe crabs, broken skates, sand dollars, sea horses, endless numbers of primeval creatures quivering in the sea-mud. The waves lapped ice cold at their ankles, and they could see, far out at the horizon, the majestic white cliffs of the Antarctic icebergs as they caught the sunlight. The sky was dark indigo at the zenith, lighter, almost green on the horizons. And though the wind was blowing over the dunes as they crept, there was no sound but the sea.

Gene turned to ask Souvate a question, but the thin man motioned him to silence and led him off along the black sand. The island they were on was tiny, and in half an hour they had circled it. The place was completely desolate; there was nothing but sand. Souvate continued to walk around the island, indicating that they must move spirally toward the center before they would find the temple.

After they had thrice moved about the isle, they saw half-buried in a dune, a human skeleton green with growths. "That is a warning," Souvate hissed. By their fifth turn, closing in on the center, the light changed, and the previously unusual atmospheric darkness became darker still. And though the sun, a small, wan disc, was still high, the sky was dark enough to see the brighter stars.

On their seventh turn they reached the center. Nothing seemed to change abruptly, and Gene allowed his tense muscles to loosen. Souvate pointed at his feet. There an urn jutted from the sand. Gene bent low over it and heard, or thought he heard, soft, uncontrollable sobbing, or perhaps a sucking sound.

"That is your uncle," Souvate informed him. "His fate is too hideous to comprehend while you occupy your body. Take the vessel, but do not tip it over. To escape, there is only one way. You must retrace the spiral, and you must be absolutely silent. When you arrive at the place where we began, you will return to London. But you will have to hurry."

Souvate pointed out to sea. There, at the horizon, was what Gene took at first to be another island, large and flat, rising gradually above the sea. "It's a tidal wave," the adept said. "You'd better get out before

it hits. And mind you now, if you break the spiral pattern, there can be no escape."

Gene began immediately to follow the spiral backwards, but no sooner had he begun than an old woman, at first existing only as smoke, appeared ahead of him. After she became more solid, he recognized her: it was Ocarina, the newspaper crone. She waited to follow behind Gene, holding a little lamp in one hand that glowed like an icy fan of the sun.

He wanted to ask her who she really was, but the silence in the air was dreadful. He stepped up his pace, glancing nervously out to sea, trying to gauge the progress of that wave (which curiously did not seem to be moving at all), throwing a glance to his back, too, watching the crone who slogged just far enough behind that the wind ripples in the sand covered his footsteps before she reached them. And all the while there was that ominous dark in the sky by which now the southern constellations could be seen, so that Souvate, who was watching from the center and who knew just who that crone was, had reason to fear the worst. Nevertheless, he did not forget his purpose and set about beginning the silent chant and hand-sigils that would open the hole he sought.

After Gene's fifth turn, the silence that had been the desolate silence of isolated places became unearthly, and even the waves stopped and were mute, as if they were all drawing back to feed that one mighty surge. Gene heard his breath loud and raucous in the still air. His heart was like a dervish drum, and the odd, unwholesome sucking sound grew louder and more offensive in the urn; and Gene called from his heart for a natural noise from a bird or the sea, but nothing stirred, even Souvate was still. And then and there, before he had even witnessed the horror, Mirandola decided, as he should have done long ago, to forget his interest in sorcery and to return, as quickly as he could, to the quiet, usual life of chief clerk at a small publishing firm. Then he looked over his shoulder to face Souvate, but the adept was gone, having already decided it was far wiser to slip sideways into time than to remain any longer in the growing presence of *Yog-Sothoth*. And Gene Mirandola felt the fear that had been a weight in his throat crash down into his heart as the crone widened the slit of her lamp and let the unnatural, cold light from it illuminate the sand around her. Wherever the light

shone, the empty beach vanished and another landscape became visible—a more sinister, less reasonable landscape. The thin air was like a veil burned away by the eerie lamplight, and the absurd shapes and forms that were abruptly emerging edged Gene closer and closer to panic. After one sweep of the crone's lamp, the island was transformed into a staggering arena of monoliths whose very size caused Gene's fear to cascade into a delirious horror. In his shock at the unfamiliar stars that now crowded the sky and the great insect thing that began to appear around unpredictable corners and edges with mad, swivelling mandibles, Gene dropped both the urn and the stone. And then screaming faster and faster until his cries were incoherent, he fled towards the sea, where *Yog-Sothoth's* blasphemous half-brother was already rearing his tentacled head.

Zone of Death

When they reached K'oto basin where the limecolored geodesic domes of the research complex stand out like a mold on the seacliffs, Cordon Malebolgean swung the hover controls over to his aide, Leroi Nichol. In his black command fatigue, Cordon seemed to fill the tiny cabin. There was a falcon quality about him: the beetling eyebrows, the gaunt lines of his face, the piercing steadiness of his gaze. He sat back in his sling and began gnawing the tip of his decoder. "What's the name of this place again?"

"It's the Blackwolf Project, Colonel," Leroi responded as he lifted the fliteKraft onto the cool thermal current that they would follow down. "Can't understand why they called us here," the aide continued. "They've never done military research before. They're strictly a pure research group."

"Yeah, yeah. Well they better have some practical menace for us after we've taken this risk. If the ginks come in under the wire while we're away, it could cost the whole northeast strategy." Cordon pulled out the personnel review from his flight satchel, asked, "What's the commander's name on this project?"

"No one commander *per se*," Leroi responded. "This is a privately funded project. Della Marduk is the acting administrator."

"Della Marduk," Cordon repeated to himself as he glanced down the review agenda to find her. "Ah, quite impressive scrip on her. She's had

plenty of military experience: Cobalt omega and Höhere—the two major laser/maser development projects last decade. They've been most responsible for the favorable turn-around of the war." The attached hologram showed a lean black woman, straight and aloof, her hair meticulously rowed, her eyes sullen.

When the fliteKraft was docked and the two men dropped out of their slings onto the receiving platform, they sifted through the knots of workers looking for Della Marduk. Instead, a short, bearded man in an orange flight jacket with command insignia greeted them. "Hello, hello. Thank God you've come. I'm Dr. Hafiz."

Cordon shifted his eyes inquisitively to his aide. Leroi leaned toward him, said, "V. Hafiz—he's chief engineering director of Blackwolf and the major source of their independent funding."

Hafiz seemed to assimilate Cordon's bewilderment, and as he led them out of the landing area, he added, "I know my name wasn't included in the request transcript—I wanted to remain anonymous because some of the personnel here would find a military presence annoying. I didn't want to draw their fire. Perhaps you were expecting Della. Well, quite frankly, she isn't expecting you."

Before Cordon could respond, Hafiz led them off the receiving platform and along an open catwalk that wound through the numbing roar of hover engines. When next they could talk, the bearded engineer had ushered them into a spacious, circular office the center of which was dominated by a large round desk covered with geometric models. The curved wall was bound with rows of numerically labelled pipes and valves. After Hafiz cleared the room of workers who were cluttered around the incessantly active computer terminal, he seated the two men, said, "This is the ideal conference room. It's sealed and pressurized to keep out the engine noise from the docking port—also, I'm kept completely aware of all operations through that." He pointed his chin at the computer which hummed almost noiselessly in its berth of printout copiers. "Please don't be intimidated by the fact that this looks like a factory control room. All those pipes just feed out superheated steam from the docking port and the main nuclear reactor which supplies all our power."

Cordon shifted restlessly in his chair. "Tell me, Doctor," he began, "why am I here?"

Hafiz smiled unnoticeably behind his beard at the Colonel's directness. "Because Blackwolf has literally stumbled upon the most effective military weapon and the most elusive scientific enigma of all time."

Leroi Nichol had his thin decoder unit out and began to prepare it for record. He looked interrogatively toward Hafiz.

"Four weeks ago," the engineer continued, "our widescan detectors picked up a spontaneous atmospheric disturbance several kilometers north of K'oto basin. It was a sudden and sustained rift in the radio curtain. The only thing we figured could cause that would be a strong magnetic source on the order of several hundred gauss. But what that magnetic source could be, how it could have merely popped out of thin air, we had no idea. So we dispatched several hovers, strohlKraft, equipped with detectors in all ranges of the electromagnetic spectrum and with laser communicating systems. When they reached the site, the initial disturbance had abated totally, but the strohlKrafts were able to detect residual radiation, most of it high in the red regions of the spectrum. That residual heat described the brief trajectory of the magnetic source before it vanished. It was very close to the ground. When they tracked it, the residual path led them, surprisingly, to an unconscious man. He was lying in one of the fallow fields about a kilometer south of Tsai P'an plateau. He was unusually dressed—appearing to be in a late Victorian style—and he had with him a large stone disc, singly perforated in the center and circumscribed by an unrecognizable script."

"How big was that disc?" Cordon asked.

"Pretty near a fifty centimeter diameter," Hafiz replied. "After he was admitted to Blackwolf we ran every conceivable test on him and the stone. But I've asked you here to see what we've discovered about that stone. Careful cobalt dating indicates that it was originally carved, as ridiculous as this sounds, over a billion years ago. The material of the stone itself appears to be older than our expectations of the age of the universe. And though that in itself is remarkable, what I have to show you now is even more stunning."

Hafiz rose and led the men on a brief walk through a tangle of corridors to a warehouse-sized room with an immensely high ceiling lost in steel rafters and catwalks. The activity in the room was focused around endless banks of computer components. Just off the center of the chamber was a clear platform, like a glass scaffold, with the pierced

stone visible inside it and an unusual metallic sculpture perched on top. It was unusual because it appeared to be constructed of only three sheets of blue gunmetal. But the respective angles and the contiguous points of the sheets seemed to defy the logic of gravity and perspective so that from one position there appeared to be a dozen facets clumped together like a beehive balanced on a pinhead, and from a different standpoint the whole structure had the appearance of a single metallic slab tottering perilously on one corner.

"After it became clear how old the stone was," Hafiz said, "we were anxious to decode the inscription that's on it. It took our entire computer complex over two hundred hours to break it down, which is a remarkably brief time considering the complexity of the code. What it came out with is a mathematical model—not a linguistic phrase, but a numerical expression. Two days ago we completed this geometric projection of that expression. We haven't even begun to determine all the properties of the space that it displaces. But we have good reason now to believe that its nature may undermine our longest accepted notions of causality and interconnectedness."

"Is this the weapon you called us here to see?" Cordon asked.

Hafiz nodded. "We know next to nothing about it, but its most disturbing attribute may well recommend it for military use." The engineer signaled one of the workers over to him and gave him brief instructions. "Somehow, and we have no idea how," he went on after the worker ran off, "the peculiar angles of these planes create a small but significant singularity. That is, there is one point in that maze of angles where there is no reflection, no vibration echo, just a thin black slice through which signals propagate in only one direction—inward. Whatever enters does not return. Look—"

Hafiz pointed at a long metal girder that was being crane-swivelled into position alongside the clear scaffold. The crane moved forward and the thin girder swung toward the sculpture looking as if it would topple it over. Instead the girder began to disappear as if it were entering a hole. Leroi Nichol took several steps forward to see just where the rod was vanishing. It was merely entering the space between the angles of the metal sheets and disappearing. Hafiz signalled the crane; it moved back, and the men could see that only a third of the girder's length remained.

"Its military implications, I think, are obvious," the engineer said.

Cordon slowly circled the structure, drew up close to examine it, asked, "Do you really believe this would be practical in a tactical engagement?"

"Well, there certainly are questions of mobility and application that have to be resolved, but the defensive practicality of it is without question. It would provide an impenetrable shield against detection devices, radar and laser, and offensive systems, projectile or phase."

"But, damn it, Hafiz," Cordon barked as he turned from the scaffold, "where do those things go when they enter?"

Hafiz stared blankly at him, somewhat taken back that a military man would be concerned about theory. "Uh, we don't know yet."

Cordon Malebolgean had asked his aide to interview Della Marduk. Leroi found her on one of the terrace porticos that overlook the sea. Already the western hills, visible to their left, troughed the light of day. The wind from the sea was steady and high, ruffling the papers that Della held in her lap. She turned to face him when he introduced himself. Her skin looked almost purple in the twilight, and her eyes, though large and bright, seemed very tired. However, when she learned that Hafiz had called in military advisers, her gaze darkened with anger. At first she refused to talk with him, but he was very cordial, and there was something sincere in his broad, flat face that invited confidence.

Eventually, she told him, "Blackwolf has been in financial trouble for over a year now. Hafiz will do anything to get the necessary funds to keep our research going."

"Why doesn't he invite government help?"

"That would mean he would no longer be running the show. He's certainly ego-maniacal. I think that if he didn't see a possibility of selling the warp-structure to the military for a fortune, he'd sell Marc to a carny."

"Who's Marc?"

"The person they picked up with the stone."

"How does he check out?"

"He doesn't. He's more strange than the warp-structure. He was unconscious for over two weeks. During that whole time his body literally refused medication and sustenance. It passed right through his system while he maintained his own biochemical integrity, Lord knows how. We tested his clothes, and they turned out to be genuine

1882 accoutrements. Same with his credentials—Marc Souvate, London, England. But what is stranger still, when we graphed his brain pattern—well, there was more than one directive source.”

“How do you mean?”

“More than one mind in his brain is what I’m saying. In fact, there are thousands of minds in his brain.”

“That *is* impossible, isn’t it?”

“So is the fact that tissue, blood, and bone analysis reveal that his physiology has been out of style for over a million years. We just can’t figure it out.”

“What happened when he came to?”

“He was in a carefully monitored isolation chamber. We were able to project holographic images of us into the room, but somehow he knew they were unreal and looked directly at our hidden cameras, shocking the wits out of us.”

“Have you talked with him?”

“Oh, yes. He’s quite vocal, rather pleasant, Continental accent and all. But it’s just small talk. He’s very interested in getting his stone back, though he won’t tell us a thing about it.”

“Where is he kept?”

“He isn’t. He can open any lock. We just let him roam at will. We keep the stone in the base of the warp-structure. It seems that’s the only place he refuses to go. That stone registers off our dating scale. The inscription alone is over a billion years old. We don’t want him vanishing with it.”

After talking with Della Marduk, Leroi Nichol spent a sleepless night wondering about Marc Souvate. Cordon Malebolgean was not at all interested in the possibility of talking to a man over a million years old. He and Hafiz worked all night discussing the practical ramifications of the warp-structure.

The next morning Leroi went looking for Marc Souvate. He found him squatting in the shadows near the long body of the swamp. He was naked, and his thighs were mudstreaked. Mushrooms, bracken fiddle necks and bamboo shoots that he had gathered glistened on a small piece of canvas at his side.

He was amiable and appeared to be amused that Leroi had taken so much trouble to find him. He pointed out the limp fish sleeping in the

weeds, half hidden by scattered peach petals. Then they walked together for a little bit, and Souvate remarked about the quail's breast sky and smoky hills, and the slopes of Mt. Hiei veiled in haze for the last day of Spring. All of this made Leroi restless. On the other side of the mountain, somewhere in the Himalayas, men were surely dying. He found it unpleasant to be walking in the country, so far from his duty as a soldier.

"Forgive me if I'm boring you," Souvate said, "but it's not often that I find myself in life as in a strange garment. I am always surprised at the earth."

This was as much of an invitation as Leroi felt he was going to get to ask the questions he had wanted to ask all morning. "Who are you? How did you come here, and why do you stay?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I must know, silly as it may sound. I've been a soldier all my life—life and death have been clear cut, until now. I can't believe some of the things they've told me about you."

"I don't know that I can answer you. Soon I'll be gone. That's all I really know. The tall spirit who lodged here has left already. Whatever I have to do has not yet begun."

"I don't understand you."

"Whatever I would tell you is not meant to be understood. I move through time the way you move through space. How can you possibly understand that? I'm following the spoor of a timeless geist, spirit, call it what you will. What follows me is what follows all of us. The laughing ax, only it's different for me. You furiously eat your meals of fire, the silence of animals, so that you may live a little longer, the blood dragging always at your heels. I have no definite time in which to live or die. What follows me is worse for though it too comes from the void it has no substance in this world other than through chance."

"Is what follows you death?"

"It is outside of death. It is the opposite of the spirit I follow. I have names for these things which make discussing them easier. I am tracking what I call Nodens through time. What follows me is its entropy, *Yog-Sothoth*. Truly, there was no beginning to this, there'll be no end."

"If it's that irrational then it seems to promise a new order on a supersensible level."

"That's hunger for the sake of hunger. There is nothing rational about this. It simply is."

"But you've been talking about time. That's causality. There's reason there."

"When *Yog-Sothoth* arrives it will use time as a glove to swat us like insects. Just as when I first arrived, the power of Nodens was strong and there were a string of fortunate coincidences that allowed the computers to crack the inscription of the pierced stone on its first try and eventually to construct a hole in time on the first try. All chance. Soon it'll be working the other way. Unfortunate coincidence will begin to destroy everything."

"If that's true, then what can be done about it?"

"I must have the pierced stone back. It's my only means of moving towards Nodens and dragging *Yog-Sothoth* behind me."

"Why don't you just take it?"

"I don't dare approach that hole. *Yog-Sothoth* is the Lord of holes, and he would surely destroy me."

"Have you explained this to the others?"

"The others have already been used to build the hole. They can't help me. They belong to *Yog-Sothoth* now. You can, though. Or your commander. He could help, too. But if we wait too much longer then *Yog-Sothoth* will hold back no more. We must hurry."

"Well, is it true?" Leroi Nichol asked, leaning across the formica table to face Della Marduk.

"It's true that the stone disc code is complicated enough to have taken our computer system several months to crack. We were lucky, though."

"Luck! But that's what he's saying, Della!"

"Listen, Leroi, I can't just hand over the oldest known artifact in the world because this man has threatened us with a streak of bad luck. Why hasn't he told me about it? You don't have any authority, I don't see why he told you."

V. Hafiz was sitting to the side resting his head in his hands. "Captain Nichol, you've got to understand that we've only begun to examine that stone. It holds the answers to a lot of mysteries, perhaps about the origin, perhaps even the source. Leave these matters to us, please. And confine yourself to assisting your superior."

Leroi felt a clump of frustration forming in his throat, but before he could speak the intercom on Della's desk squawked out several numbers. Della and Hafiz were both on their feet immediately.

"What's happening?" Leroi demanded.

"There's been an explosion in the microlab," Hafiz snapped. "They think a selenium gas canister has gone off. Come on! Your colonel's working in that area!"

"Everybody's got to be evacuated," Della added. "Selenium gas is odorless and colorless—but it's a lethal nerve poison. We've got to hurry!"

Cordon Malebolgean was alone in the second floor library reading over construction specifications for the warp-structure when the fire alarm rang. He looked up from his work with an annoyed grunt and peered out of the window. There was no smoke. He continued his reading, thought better of it, and went to the door. There was no one in the corridor, and there was no smoke. He decided to finish sizing up the construction reports and keep his eyes peeled for the fire. He was only two floors up.

He returned to his desk. When he looked up, two men in glowbrite orange airtight suits with wide plastic reflector-headmasks were lumbering toward him.

He stood up. "Is there a fire?" he asked feeling the first delirious movements of terror in his bowels.

One of the men grabbed him and began leading him quickly out of the room. The other fitted a respirator to his mouth and told him not to get excited.

Cordon tried to turn his head toward one of the men. "Is there a fire?" he asked.

"He died within ten minutes after we got him out," Hafiz explained. "It was a freak explosion. It shouldn't have happened."

Leroi Nichol sat quite still in the small anteroom, looking ahead blankly. Behind Hafiz, he could see Marc Souvate approaching.

Hafiz thrust forward a sheet of crumpled paper. "This is what he was writing when the canister burst."

Leroi glanced at it. It was merely a memo to Strategy specifying the warp-structure. Cordon had heavily doodled the portion of it containing the Strategy chief's last name.

Souvate took the paper from Leroi, looked at it quizzically. "Why did he underline and mark this person's last name?" he asked pointing at the chief's name, Winston P. Mirandola.

Leroi shook his head. "Mirandola? I don't know. I doubt that he was thinking."

Souvate looked intensely at Leroi. "It's begun, you know."

After Souvate left, Hafiz bent close, said, "I guess you'll be getting back to your command now."

Leroi gave him an angry nod. "Yeah. Right."

Leroi found Della on the portico overlooking the sea again. The tide was out, and the bay was sodden as the bed of an ancient lake. They greeted each other in silence. Leroi made no comment at first. Finally he said, "For a long time I thought death was friendly. It seemed logical, the only way out of the absurd duality that mocks us from birth with paradox. Yeah, well, finally death seeped up from the tiniest capillaries of my toes and made me a soldier. I was a good soldier, too, but now I remember the look I saw on Cordon's face when they carried him out of that room and he knew he'd be dead in less than five minutes. I beat my body now. I shout at myself. I see what I've betrayed. So I've been a good warrior. Who has it helped? Della, I'm ashamed standing here beside you."

Della faced him, put both of her hands to the sides of his face. "What do you want to do?"

"I'm not sure. But I can't leave here until I find out about Cordon's death."

"But what is there to find out?"

"How he died. Is Souvate right? Are we the pawns of powers, forces, spirits free of space-time? Right now I'm ready to believe him. I even feel as if there's another being living inside me. He's looking out of my eyes. I can hear him in the wind coming off the sea."

"I know what you mean. I move continually with the consciousness of that other, totally alien, nonhuman other, humming inside like a taut drum, carefully trying to avoid any direct thought of it, trying to be attentive to the real-world of flesh and stone."

"Della, I want that disc. I want to give it back to Souvate. I think it might end this madness."

Della reached out and touched Leroi's shoulder. "I understand, Leroi. It's frightening, isn't it, being this close to the irrational? I guess I shouldn't have been so stubborn before—but . . . I have an overwhelming hatred for the military. I've worked too long for them and seen their evil too close. I was hardened by Cobalt omega and Höhere—building death machines without a thought of what death really is. It took Cordon's death for me to accept the unreality of everything that's happened this past month, to be able to put it into a humane context. It seems like a dream. It all happened too fast. How could we have believed that we had any control over any of this? It's too unreal. I believe now in those autonomous, unconscious powers. Okay, Leroi. We'll give the stone to Souvate first thing tomorrow."

"But we can't let Hafiz know. He'd never allow it."

"He won't know."

A siren wail woke Leroi Nichol. He threw on a shirt and burst into the corridor where several workers in fire-garb were rushing past. One of them told him the trouble was near the landing deck, and he ran at full stride.

Hafiz was standing in the corridor with several workers, all wrapped in asbestos cloth, when Leroi arrived. "What happened?" he asked.

Hafiz's face was dark with blood. "There was nothing we could do. One of the pipes in my circle-office burst. The room's airtight, you know." Hafiz stuttered for a moment, then, "We were helpless. The place filled up instantly with super-heated steam. There was nothing to do. It was over as soon as it began. The room . . . hell, the room became a pressure cooker. Della was caught in there alone. She was cooked through. We found her sitting just as she was, as if she were alive. There was nothing . . . nothing we could do. It was such a freak."

Leroi met Souvate by the swamp. Five days heat and nothing moved on the water. The air was still, and clouds of insects could be seen hanging motionless over the mud.

"I believe you now," Leroi said by way of greeting. "But I'm confused. I'm so confused."

Souvate gazed thoughtfully at Leroi. The young man's face had a boyish quality but also a hint of ghetto violence. "Look, Leroi, if you

believe me, you will help me. If you help me, then you will die."

Leroi's cheeks were sunk slightly, his lips partly open, and on his face there was an ominous and fixed expression—an absorbed, contemplating expression of the unconscious who are ready to die. The two men sat looking at each other for a long time in silence.

"Okay, you will die," Souvate presently said. "You are already swollen by the silent sound of death. You are truly a soldier. I can speak to you and show you things I have not been able to do for centuries. You are one with your death. You are a living man."

A gust of wind struck Leroi's neck, and in the next moment he felt it streaming about his wet ankles. He sensed then that he had fought in so many battles and killed so many men not out of idealism, not for loyalty, as everyone had thought, but that he had won and lost for the same reason, his overwhelming pride. And now that pride was reduced in him to nothing by the sheer certainty of his death. There was nothing he feared now. Nothing he aspired towards. Nothing was all he expected. Only nothing.

Souvate leaned over the still waters of the swamp and cleared the algae from the surface so that the water was black and crystal. He motioned Leroi to look. Floating on the mirror surface, Leroi saw mistings of civilizations, towers, gardens, battles. The water stirred in the breeze, and he saw clouded skyscrapers, webs of cities. And these rippled away to reveal the spread of swampferns fronded in a rising mist, and more civilizations, more settlements, more wars, and then the tangled jungle again, and beasts and beasts, and then there came the luminescent dancers, the burning gulfs, the hanging gardens. It was endless.

"You are nothing in all of this," Souvate said. "But you can grow wise, so terrible, sucking death's moldy tits. If you help me, I will run with you like the horizon, and you will leave behind this inscrutable, alien life and return to the familiar, longed-for nothing. Death is silence and silence our native tongue. It's an absence that runs through our whole lives like thread through a needle. Everything we do is stitched with its color. If you help me, you must expect nothing, for that is all there is outside of action."

Leroi sat back on his heels. He realized that this had happened too often before, men consciously giving away their lives to emptiness, to

become the void. And it was going to happen too often in the future. It happened too easily. Blood was too much like water. Cries were too much like silence. And shooting somebody in the head was too much like striking a match.

They were silent for a long time. Leroi closed his eyes. He was beginning to feel slightly feverish. He knew that this fever would remain, without there ever being the relief of weariness, until he did what now he felt was his fate. He was quite familiar with the fever. It always came on him before he would have to kill. Perhaps, he thought, it was his defense against fear.

When Leroi left Souvate, he still felt the fever. It was with him all the way back to Blackwolf and with him as he washed his face in his room. It was burning up his fear and with his fear his ambitions, his desires. All his aspirations were like a dream fading, like the sink draining, a transparent rose swallowed by its stem.

He gritted his teeth like a cliff as he broke out his Magnex .52 and loaded it. He stuffed his pockets with extra cartridges. The heat of his fever seemed to be streaming through the tiny holes of his eyes, through the seams of his face, pulsing in the strings of his lips, streaming out through his atoms, streaming out into the black, into the ringing nothing, through the bones of his gritted teeth.

Only once did the fever begin to ebb, when he thought for a moment that what he was doing he was doing for Souvate. But who . . . *what* was Souvate? A voice. He was very little more than a voice. They had never done anything together. Nothing shared, nothing mutually discovered or lost. He was only a voice, and the memory of the voice itself lingered around Leroi, impalpable, like a fading echo of some cry, atrocious, savage, without any kind of sense.

And thinking that, Leroi felt a little wind like a cold finger between his shoulders. He felt the fatigue of his spirit shudder through his body. A lonely desolation overcame him as if he had been robbed of a belief or had missed his destiny in life. But then, almost with a cry, he forced himself to stop thinking, and he felt the cardboard of his body begin to warm again.

He wrapped the bulky Magnex in a towel, walked out into the corridor and headed toward where they kept the warp-structure. Slowly he was beginning to get the feel of his identity. As he passed office

after office and rows of laboratories, hearing the muffled voices of researchers, he began to feel like some vengeful demon set out by all that is unmeasurable in the cosmos. He thought of all these men and women making silence in belljars, refrigerating emptiness, unpicking numbers, tweezing out the gluey hearts of inaudibly squeaking cells. And he felt his heart beginning to pound harder and harder until he had to force himself to calm down.

When he reached the warehouse-sized laboratory where they housed the warp-structure he walked in nonchalantly. Surprisingly, there was no one around. This disturbed him, and he suspected for an instant that something might be wrong.

Then, hearing the scratch of claws on the smooth floor, he turned to face the warp-structure and balked for one long moment in terror. A humanoid with a face flat as a snail, like the underface of a shark, was approaching him. Frantically, he ripped away the towel and discharged two shots into its face. Then in one burst of fear-smooth movement, as the roar of the gun swelled through the chamber, he sprinted to the warp-structure. Two more blasts from the Magnex splintered the clear plastic base, and he scooped out the pierced stone by putting his forearm through the hole. He'd done it, he thought to himself. It had happened so fast, he couldn't believe it. That creature, it must have come from the warp-structure—one of *Yog-Sothoth's* demons, he told himself. He took careful aim and blew the three metal plates apart. The sound of the metal being ripped sent him wheeling backwards.

Something grabbed his arm, and he spun about to face a bird-head, bald, lizard-eyed, the size of a basketball on two staggering insect legs. He blasted the egg-shell object to a blood-rag and flung himself past it to the door where another shark-face was opening its fangs. He emptied the Magnex into it, and as he spun past the bubbling mess slammed in another cartridge clip. *Yog-Sothoth* was everywhere, he thought. He was inescapable. Could he possibly get away with the stone before one of these abominations stopped him?

At the far end of the corridor returning to his room he heard excited voices approaching. Instead he loped the other way, toward the hover port. He scrambled along the catwalks until he reached the landing platform where another creature waited, a belly-ball of hair, with crab-legs, eyeless. Its belly opened, an oven of fangs, and Leroi cut a path through it with the Magnex.

He threw the pierced stone into a fliteKraft and leaped after it. In an instant he had the hover vehicle off the platform, and he was rising, dumbfaced, from the port leaving behind several engineers and workers lying in their blood.

Hafiz and a cadre of others had scrambled after him. They couldn't believe he was cutting down unarmed workers so frantically. Hafiz, in fact, had swung out a high-intensity X-ray projector and had rolled it furiously down the halls after Leroi, barking orders not to shoot lest they blast the pierced stone to dust. When the generator had warmed, Hafiz had moved the bulky projector onto one of the catwalks, and as the fliteKraft rose out of its dock, he opened the beryllium end-window and bathed the hover vehicle in a curtain of maximum-roentgen X-rays. In an hour or two, Hafiz figured, Leroi would be dead.

Six strohlKraft pursued Leroi. They found his hover vehicle half-embedded in a swamp. Hafiz was the first to reach it. Leroi was hunched over the controls. He had blown out his own bowels, and Hafiz had to hold his breath as he searched the cabin for the stone. It, of course, was gone. And they would spend weeks searching the swamp for it even though they had found bare footprints in the mud that led along the water ending abruptly, vanishing a dozen meters away from any tree or rock, disappearing into nothing.

The Night of the Unicorn

THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

IT WAS the night of the unicorn, and the villagers of Cozumel, the capital and only town of a small island off the Yucatan peninsula, had begun to gather in the square. The maidens wore their brightest prints, lemon and turquoise and hyacinth, so that the animal could see their dresses even if not their virginal countenances and give them the approval of his notice. Somewhat more sedate in dress, their mothers maintained that haughty vigilance which had thus far safeguarded the daughters for marriage, while the young men of the town, casual in figured American sport shirts, looked impishly at the girls who would one day become their wives.

Maria stood in the doorway of her basket shop, debating if she should join the rest. The night of the unicorn! The words sang themselves in her brain, like an old Mayan chant to the god of swallows. It was said that, a hundred years ago, a unicorn had emerged from the Mayan-haunted jungles of the interior and walked through the town, acknowledging the purest women with a nod of his golden horn or the press of his warm muzzle. He had never returned. But the villagers still celebrated in the hope that they could once again lure him from the jungle. Besides, Maria guessed, they loved a holiday and the chance to wear finery.

"Shall we go?" asked Mico, appearing quietly beside Maria in the door. At seventeen, his face looked adolescent but his eyes, gray and deep and a little sad, looked forty. He was small and copper-skinned like most of the islanders, with short-cut prickly hair. Also like them, he worked for tourists in the season, gigging lobsters or guiding

photographers into the interior of the island where Mayan temples still thrust their stone jaguars through matted lianas. But a seriousness of purpose, almost a solemnity, distinguished him from the other youths, who laughed when he drew out his English grammar and announced that one day he would go to school in America. Maria loved him as a brother. Only Mico had befriended her since she had come to the island a year ago to open her shop.

"Shall we go?" he repeated. "The unicorn may truly come this year. My father saw strange tracks beside the Temple to the Jaguar."

"It is my dream to see the unicorn," Maria sighed. "But he will probably ignore me." It was not a secret that Maria, in Mérida, had sold her body and thus amassed the money with which, at forty-one, she had come to Cozumel to open a basket shop. She had come to forget her tawdry past. But the men of Cozumel remembered her from Mérida. Since she was still beautiful, with the slenderest figure on the island and with curious slanted eyes as purple as a murex shell, they paid her unpleasant attentions. What was worse, their jealous wives refused to buy her baskets, and her shop was threatened with failure. With a few hundred dollars, she could purchase curios for the tourist trade; but she lacked such a sum and the poor baskets she imported from Mérida were fit only for the islanders who refused to buy them. Her money would soon be gone. What then? The prospect of returning to Mérida sickened her.

"He will not pass you by," said Mico firmly. "If he comes at all, he will come to you."

She touched his cheek and smiled. "Let us go."

He took her arm and they walked toward the square. A breeze from the sea brought the stench of lobster shells rotting in the harbor. Was there something else, Maria asked herself, a fragrance of jungle flowers and the sweet moistness of buried temples? For an instant, figures trembled to clarity within her mind, a silken unicorn surrounded by jaguars, boars, and coatis. When the unicorn raised his head, the scythe of his golden horn flashed in the green light.

"Mico, is there something in the air tonight?"

Mico sniffed. "Yes," he said matter-of-factly. "There are pigs and chickens and asses—" Indeed, they were passing a wire-fenced yard where children huddled with pigs under sapodilla trees and roosters

drownsed in the branches. Ahead of them in the street, an ass and a mongrel sniffed at a tuft of garbage.

"You're right, of course. I thought for a moment—"

"You thought it was the unicorn," said Mico, apologetic because he had not guessed her meaning. "Tonight he will surely come."

"What will he look like, Mico?" Sometimes she tried to draw him into moods of fantasy, though she loved him no less because he was more a realist than a dreamer.

"A lordly beast, my father says. His horn will catch the lamplight and gleam like a crescent moon above the white clouds of his mane. He will move up the street like a Mayan priest in a sacred procession. And he will pause beside the innocent—"

"If I could only glimpse him," she sighed. "Just a glimpse, no more."

"When he comes," Mico continued, "he will pause beside *you*." Maria claimed Mayan blood, and Mico had often compared her to the ancient corn goddesses who came from the jungle to teach the natives agriculture. "He will pause and dip his horn—"

"Maria, go home," screeched a female voice, its owner concealed in a blur of faces. "You will frighten the unicorn!"

Suddenly Maria saw that the people in the street, both men and women, were staring at her. The men spoke loudly, careful that she should catch their gross compliments:

"Maria's kiss is worth a dozen unicorns. . . ."

"In Mérida they called her the Crimson One. . . ."

Maria lowered her head but she did not turn aside or slow her pace. "We will stand apart," she whispered to Mico. "There is no need that the unicorn see us. Only that we see him." They sought the shelter of a bougainvillea bush, its moon-silvered blossoms, purple by daylight, exploding earthward. Beyond the bush a row of streetlights kindled the village to a garish orange. But the sacred circle of the bougainvillea seemed inviolate to the work of man, aloof from his artificial lamps, his overpainted houses, and his strident outcries. Within this circle, companioned only by the moon, Maria and Mico awaited the unicorn.

In the streets, in the doorways of the shops, the crowd continued to chatter, first about the unicorn, then about lobsters and tobacco and silks from Mérida, the tourists who would soon be coming from the United States and the new guest houses built to accommodate them. In

a little while they seemed to forget the unicorn. Had anyone really expected to see him after a hundred years, Maria wondered, except herself and Mico? Perhaps even Mico was humoring her out of politeness. A good boy, yes, but practical, his dreams extending no farther than a school in America.

And then she saw the animal in the street. He was walking toward her. He came slowly, deliberately, looking to neither side of him. At first she could not understand why the crowd had failed to take notice, for an unmistakable horn rose above his head.

"The unicorn!" she cried. "It is the unicorn, Mico!" Why did no one see him? Why did even Mico stare, like a stupid owl, into the distance? For an instant modesty restrained her. Then she forgot herself. She began to run, weaving among the crowd, brushing against the virgins, who drew back as if she had dirtied their dresses. She scarcely felt the jagged pebbles under her thin shoes. A bicycle came toward her and swerved to avoid a collision. The driver was too astonished to swear.

At last she knelt before the animal and stretched out her hand to touch his horn. How lordly he looked, even in the garish lamplight! How imperial was his bearing, how like a king's! She hesitated, suddenly aware of her daring, frozen with her fingers inches from his horn. She, the fallen, importuning a unicorn! But slowly, with infinite majesty, he pressed his muzzle against her cheek, and she felt the warm salt wetness of her own tears.

A babble of voices stabbed at her ears. The people are startled, she thought, because the unicorn has honored me, the least pure, and overlooked the virgins. The voices rose into a howling unison, and then she realized that the crowd was laughing at her. Laughing and calling her unicorn an ass!

"You profane him," she shouted. "You profane the holy unicorn!"

Mico hurried to her side. "Are you sure he is a unicorn?" he whispered. "Look at him again."

She looked at the animal closely for the first time, no longer blinded by tears and wonder. Imperial? On the contrary, he was small, gray, mottled with age and mud. There was little to distinguish his body from that of an ass. But his horn. That was the irrefutable mark of his kingship! Only a unicorn boasted such a horn. But she looked again, and she saw that, though he truly held a horn, it was dirty and crooked,

and it might have grown there as a freak of nature or it might have been placed there as a hoax.

Boys, emboldened by their sisters, began to scoop garbage from the street and hurl it at Maria and her unicorn. A banana peel struck her face and another struck the animal where the horn sprouted from his head. He began to look baffled and frightened, not kingly at all. A simple-minded ass in the midst of a hostile crowd, Maria thought. Well, no matter. She would not let the crowd make fun of him. Facing his attackers, she returned the banana peels and shouted, "You leave this animal alone! Whatever he is, you have no right to hurt him!"

She felt Mico's hand on her shoulder. "The animal has gone, Maria. His horn fell off and he ran away." He presented the horn to her, the dirty crescent which somehow had been fastened to the head. She clutched the horn and began to run, tears in her eyes, tears of shame for her own embarrassment and, even more, for the helpless animal harassed by the crowd. She did not stop until she had come to her house and run through the clean, spare kitchen into a garden where a pool, no wider than a well, reflected a mahogany tree, a moon, and a riot of stars. Beside the pool, she fell to her feet and the horn slipped from her fingers. Breathless, Mico overtook her and waited for her to speak. For a long time she was silent. Mico retrieved the horn and began to wash it in the water.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked finally. "You know it is false. Someone has played a trick on me."

"It is very heavy," he said. "I want to see what it is made of."

The hard surface of the horn glittered beneath a coating of mud and filth. In the pool, among a hundred stars and beside the golden scimitar of the moon, a second scimitar materialized, richer than the first.

He handed the horn to Maria. "I believe it is made of gold."

She looked at him, unbelieving. She took the horn in her hand and marvelled at its weight and its hard, smooth texture. A small treasure in gold! Her mind leaped: precious curios from the mainland to sell the tourists, an education for Mico.

"But shouldn't we return it to the unicorn?" she asked doubtfully.

"He will grow another. This one he meant for you."

"Then we must thank him! He is probably heading for the interior. If we hurry, we can overtake him."

But they were too late. Beyond the village, they found his tracks vanishing into the jungle and knew that he had eluded them. Swallows and frogs muffled whatever hoofbeats they might have heard.

"We'll never find him now," sighed Maria. "And we never told him how grateful we were."

As if to reassure her, a lordly cry thundered among the orchids and cacti, and briefly, goldenly, a pair of eyes poised in the black and silver night. The swallows and frogs fell silent.

"Good-bye, king unicorn," Maria whispered. "A king has no need of a crown. He carries kingliness in his heart."

"So does a queen," said Mico.

The Warlord of Kul Satu

BRIAN BALL

ARCHAEOLOGISTS can forget that the past is still with us. Its ghosts still linger. We forgot at Kul Satu.

The Warlord has been buried after the manner of the Scythian kings who were also battle-leaders. His horses had been pole-axed and placed around the central circular tomb. Fourteen men and eight women, one of them his queen or chief concubine, had contributed their deaths to his monument. Most had been strangled, a few poisoned. Food and weapons, cauldrons and armour, had been supplied on a lavish scale. The Warlord could ride with a full retinue through the eternal plains.

Al, my fiancée, saw him first.

"This is one big-time operator!" he called.

We were delighted. Finding a Scythian Warlord so far West meant that we knew the extent of the warrior-herdsmen's penetration of Europe. Did I feel a chill of apprehension when I looked into the juniper coffin? Or was it that a chill wind had sprung up across the Hungarian plain? I remember feeling proud of Al.

It was one of the workmen the Hungarian government had supplied who made me feel a little uneasy.

"Grave-robbers!" he muttered.

The locals had never dared go near the Warlord's grave. Even after twenty-five centuries, his grim reputation had survived. It was a place of evil spirits, we were assured. The workman made the sign of the cross and edged away. Al was peeved by his remark.

I was a little annoyed too. We had never thought of ourselves as robbers. The Hungarians had been glad to give us permits to excavate the mound at Kul Satu. We were financially independent, we were reputable archaeologists, and they knew we wouldn't steal the gold and silver from the tomb. How could we be robbers?

I looked at the mummified corpse. The Warlord had been a big man by Scythian standards. He was heavy-boned, and he had been well-fleshed. I could distinguish his features even after the passing of over two thousand years.

"He was some guy!" Al exulted. I thought he looked cruel and I said so. "You knew the Scythians, honey! They ate babies for breakfast!"

Sometimes I wish Al would not make macabre jokes. But he was right about the Scythians. Not that they ate babies, of course. War was their way of life, war and all its grisly rituals. They took their young women into battle with them. The Warlord's chief woman had gone to her grave with a beautifully-made sword in her hands. Al's remark troubled me. So did the Warlord's menacing features. I think it was then that I first sensed the brooding spirit of that barbaric splendidly-costumed and bejewelled warrior-king.

That night I dreamt of the gold-hilted swords, the electrum amulets, the bracelets and the magnificent silver bowls. I awoke shivering, with the pale moonlight dusting the nylon of the tent. I did not want to dream of the Scythians, but sleep took me once more and I was with the horses sweeping over the huge Hungarian steppes as they had done those long centuries ago. The ghosts of the mound at Kul Satu were stirring. I began to understand that the past is still with us.

It was the first time I had felt fear—actual and acute fear—on a dig. I awoke once more, this time hot and sweaty, and some impulse made me put on a gown and walk through the silent camp towards the mound we had opened up. The plastic sheets covering the tomb flapped in the slight wind. Even though I was filled with an overwhelming sense of dread, I was impelled to look at that cruel long-dead face.

The Warlord's presence seemed to hover about the night like some unseen but powerful miasma. In the cold moonlight, I felt the anguish of the strangled and the gripping terrors of the poisoned. Blood and dread filled the night. I ran, whimpering.

Why did I not go to Al for comfort and reassurance I shall never understand. Perhaps I thought he would consider me foolish. I was. All I can say is that a scientist isn't supposed to be afraid of his field of research. I was a fool. I told Al nothing.

We worked hard for the next few days photographing, classifying, packing, exploring, cataloguing. It should have been pleasant and rewarding work, but I was too tired to share Al's enthusiasm. Each night I dreamt of the terrible Scythians. There was always violence and, somewhere hovering just outside the edges of the dreams, the grim spirit of the Warlord of Kul Satu. I think more of the workmen were afflicted by that brooding presence, but they were being well paid and said nothing. The workman who had called us robbers occasionally glared at Al or me, but he too kept his opinions to himself. Work was scarce in Hungary.

My dreams were clearer now. The horses were strong, short-necked beasts. It did not seem strange that I should be riding with the men. Armed and armoured, we flew over the vast green plain like some storm from the East. And the Warlord was somewhere close, very close.

I was desperately afraid now of the terrible presence. I knew that his ghost was abroad, that our disturbance of his tomb had given some kind of unholy sense of outrage to his terrible spirit. I was too young, too much in love to risk my fiancée's peace of mind; I think too that I was afraid of his macabre jokes. The thought of Al's laughter would be too much. What a fool I was!

The fifth night after we had opened the juniper coffin, I saw the Warlord's face. Flat, Mongol, slant-eyed, ferocious, it was the living counterpart of that withered face in the gold-decked cloak. His green eyes were wild, his mouth a bitter line. We wheeled our horses to hear him. Commands flowed.

The reason for our wild, surging charge across the steppes became clear. Softer, richer, more civilised peoples held the Hungarian plains. They had rich soil, cattle, docile children and gold. Land, wealth, cows and slaves were the prize. In that dreadful dream I saw the Warlord look at me with contempt. His insults rang in my ears the whole of the night and the next day.

I trembled as I helped Al with the last of the packing away. As we handled the still-sharp swords and the exquisitely-chased cauldrons I

heard the Warlord's taunting voice. *How had I offended that terrible man! Why had I to endure his bitter denunciations! How was it that he could reach out across the long centuries and send his terrible spectre into my dreams!*

Al noticed my tiredness. I allowed him to send me to bed early when all I wanted was to remain conscious. Would it have changed matters if I had confided in him?

I think not.

The Warlord of Kul Satu had eaten into my soul. When I slept, I dreamt, and when I dreamt I was his. I fought sleep, of course, but it came. With it came the thundering charge, the screams of dying men and the wild, exultant bellowing of the Scythians.

The Warlord glared red-eyed at me. He pointed to the gold-hilted sword in my hand, a woman's weapon, slim and deadly. I was deeply ashamed. No Scythian woman could marry until she had killed a man. I wept. He pointed again, this time to a whimpering peasant who was trying to outrun our superb mounts. The man looked round, too exhausted to scream. He fell at my horse's feet.

The Warlord bawled a command. I dismounted. The dread, the blood, the fury, filled my whole being. And all the time, the Warlord watched, his flat face alight with malice and triumph. I struck. I turned and saw that the Warlord's face had withered and dried; but his eyes were filled with grim delight.

That night I slept deeply.

I heard the shouting as if through a fog. Al's voice was raised, but others were yelling louder. I remember my dreams and shuddered, but I saw the red light of dawn and felt the night's terrors ebbing away. I knew I was free of the Warlord. We were to leave Kul Satu that day. I wondered what the hubbub was about. Pay? Or a new find!

Al called to me. I was to dress at once. Puzzled, but not yet alarmed, I pushed the sheet back. It was then that my eyes fell on the widespread red-rust blotches. I refused to ask myself their cause. I looked at my right hand. Blood had congealed on the hand and wrist. Al called once more, this time sharply.

I washed quickly. Something made me thrust the sheets into a specimen bag.

The workman who had been afraid lay transfixed by the slim, gold-

hilted sword. He lay at the feet of the Warlord. My tears and shrieks were acceptable as feminine weakness. I don't think anyone connected me with the death, not at the time. The police were anxious to keep publicity at a minimal level. Perhaps the man was trying to steal, they suggested. A slip in the dark, an unlucky fall. . . . I made no comment.

I buried the sheets. Perhaps Al saw me, I don't know. He made no more jokes. I believe he married a girl from Maine.

What I do know is that the Warlord called more than one to his tomb, for the face of the dead workman was the face of the exhausted peasant. He had reason to fear the grim spirit of the Warlord of Kul Satu.

And so had I.

More Things

G. N. GABBARD

Things are seldom what they seem;
Skim milk masquerades as cream. . . .
—W. S. Gilbert

GEORGE closed the door behind him and leaned against it. "There is a Pale Thing That Laughs, down in the library stacks," he said.

Denis barely glanced up from his book. "Ah so. One more unfortunate who discovered at the last minute that the three dozen books he needed to finish a term paper were all checked out to a faculty member for the next ten years. Only, this one went mad. Plainly unfit for the strenuous life of a graduate student in English. Take warning by his hideous example, George: go find yourself a job driving trucks or herding chickens. Otherwise you'll end up like that poor bastard, gibbering naked among dust and magazines, eking out a miserable existence on the remains of lunches left down there by people who like to eat while they read. Which, by the way, gives you a good excuse to break that particular regulation: charity to a fellow human. Try handing that line to Miss Pinkerton the next time she catches you with a ham-and-swiss concealed in your volume of PMLA."

"No," said George, "this Thing is the real thing. I mean, it's not entirely human."

"We're all not-entirely-human here."

"Well, this Thing may not be human at all." George turned and locked the door and slumped, with an ostentatious hiss of relief, into the third best chair.

Denis untangled his feet from the second best chair and sat up. "All right, then. If you assume the survival of Fantastic Things from an

Elder Age, what better refuge could They find than that enormous part of a university library which is not open to the public, including undergraduate students? It's got everything. A cool dark place to sleep. Labyrinthine ways of shelves to stalk among, to hide among if necessary. A steady food supply of apprentice professors. The typical academic coolie—such cattle as you—sits in his wee carrel so pathetically tangled in books and index cards that he'd never notice the brief struggle in the half-light, the myriad legs scurrying off to a dark corner with something that drags, the subsequent smacking of great flabby unhuman lips. You, George, would likely not notice if the Thing, acrid stench and all, should creep up on your sanctum. . . . I wonder whether you would notice it even if you were devoured. Chomp, gulp! and another would-be Mr. Chips is assumed to have dropped out without notification."

"Oh, you're safe enough," he muttered.

"Do I detect a note of condemnation in your Philomelian song? It's true, if that's what you mean, that I've never felt the need for a carrel. But then, I've never signed the indentures to teach a hundred fifty freshmen their native language in return for two thousand dollars per annum non grata, either. And doubtless both eccentricities spring from a lack of enchantment on my part with the society of my fellow termites in the groves of academe. But if that's a sin of intellectual pride, I certainly do ample penance by forcing myself to put up with you and your remarks. For that matter, you also are safe enough. Our Thing would need intelligence enough to avoid dining on those who might be missed: janitors, librarians, student assistant librarians, and so forth. If I were such a Thing, I'd prey—yes!—on those silent types who come and go unnoticed with stolen volumes sweaty in their casual hands: because it would also be unnoticed if sometimes they came and did not go. Only their remains would remain, until the janitors finally noticed and swept out a heap of tooth-notched bones, which they would take to be leftovers from some particularly Lucullan lunch smuggled in by people who like to eat while they read. . . . Shocking!—the way some people disregard regulations."

Denis shot out a look fraught with mysterious and wholly factitious significance. But if George intended any reply, his oysterish lips must

have been busy changing all he said to inarticulate moan. Or, rather, asthmatic wheeze.

"Don't try to do all the talking, George! You should be the *jeune homme modeste*, like Ford Madox Ford *vis-à-vis* the Master. Though a more striking antithesis of 'a longish, leanish, fairish young Englishman' than you, I cannot imagine at all."

A breeze rattled the door. George looked back over his shoulder with nervous, narrowish, blackish, reddish eyes.

"That will be enough frivolous conversation for tonight. But—oh Lord, a thought just flashed its comet of ill-omen across my febrile brain." Denis placed a fingertip on the bridge of his nose and frowned: Shakespeare contemplating a complete bust. "George, you wouldn't, now, be trying out another story idea on me, would you? *Remuda*, as you very well know, does not publish science-fiction even if well written. And does not publish anything at all which is not well written, even if it's written by the roommate of the assistant editor. That goes for next year also, when I will certainly be editor in chief. All this tacky Lovecraftian stuff, George. . . . Why don't you try writing about what you know about? Go read Henry James, is my advice. Observe as a model his loose, flowing, mellifluous periods—as well as my own."

George lifted a glance from under the bristles of ponderous brows. "But it's not an idea of mine. I heard the Thing myself, and saw it, almost. It's true."

For the first time that night, Denis looked at him. His face was as pale as pig's feet in a butcher shop, and spangled with heavy sweat. He had a look of either fear or excitement—the only ambiguous one of the four expressions of which his rather crude face was capable.

"George," said Denis, "what century is this?"

Of course he had to look at the desk calendar to make sure.

"Nineteenth. You knew that, didn't you?"

"It's the twentieth century," Denis sneered, gentle as a schoolteacher reprimanding a child. "Yet you honestly believe that a Pale Thing That Laughs is living in the stacks here?"

Like a furniture van shifting into low, George's face went from fear to obstinacy. "It doesn't exactly live down there, not all the time anyway. And why shouldn't I believe it?" He took his memory in both

hands and squeezed out: "There are more Things in heaven and earth—"

"You slipped in an unauthorized upper-case," Denis said. "But after all, it's remarkable that you remember even a cliché like that. You impress me, George. Something must have stimulated your brain. Almost you persuade me. . . ." He got up and stood for a moment, visibly thinking. "Yes. There's nothing like experimental verification. Get my jacket, will you?"

George lumbered over to fetch the jacket from the back of the best chair, and held it for Denis to put on.

Because it was Friday night, the other tenants were out. Nobody saw George and Denis leave. The campus was dark, almost deserted, and quiet except for some savage noise from a fraternity house on a nearby street: music, breaking glass, the mating cries of all four genders of Greeks. That faded as they walked along.

"It probably won't be there now anyway," George said. "Gone home, I bet."

"Home! Where would that be, then? The zoo at San Antonio?"

"No, just home. I mean, it changes back into a real person and just goes home."

"Oh, it's not a full-time Thing? How wonderful for It—because, although I'm sure you don't realize it, George, there are times when it's fun to be human. And then when It feels the urge—the other urge—again, back to the old vaults for a change of skin and another sauté of green scholar. Double your pleasure. Or do I mean alternate your pleasures? By the way, do you know what a sauté is?"

"No."

"No, I suppose not. Not when you're, rather incredibly, the type who forgets to eat for days on end. How you maintain that mass of flesh. . . . George, you are a walking misery. And speaking of walking and misery, I devoutly hope we're not going to have to walk back to the apartment to get your keys that you forgot again."

George groped in his pockets and pulled forth a leather holder dully clinking. He said, "It's against the regulations for me to use these to get back in after closing time."

Denis said nothing. They went across the Mall and into the Main Building, where George used his keys.

The library of Northeastern Upper South Central Texas State Teachers College is not monstrous, but it is large enough that most of its holdings must be stored underground. The outer door is like a double segment of the wall of a padded cell.

"Better close it behind us," George said.

"If you're afraid of getting caught," Denis said.

The slam sounded hollow and muffled, with echoes out of Poe's nethermost pit. Inside, darkness was compounded by oppressive awareness of the ceiling, so low you could have reached up and put one hand flat on the chilly concrete. Instead, Denis switched on his pocket flash. There was a smell of dust and disinfectant.

"Janitors have been here and gone," George said. "Want me to hold the light for you?"

Denis handed it over, and they walked down an aisle between shelves to the center of the room. PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND ETHICS, 100-199, read a sign riveted to a slim square central pillar that held the ceiling up and the floor down. Denis led the way to the other side while George shot light ahead. They went down a half-flight of stairs to the next level: RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY, 200-299.

"Here, if anywhere, is where it should be found," said Denis. "But you can see what there is, George: nothing. No Thing, that is."

Then something began to growl in the dark, not far away.

"My stomach," George said apologetically. "I haven't eaten for a while."

"Come on," Denis snapped. "We'll go right down to the last level and get this nonsense over with."

They stumbled down four and a half dim flights to the cellar. George swung the light. BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND PERIODICALS, 000-099. FALLOUT SHELTER, CAPACITY 250. From where they stood on either side of the pillar, cramped tiers of shelves marched away into darkness. They looked around at an intermittent circle of upright slabs, black steel dulled by the dust of pulpwood paper: like a metallic spiderweb crammed with dry musty corpses. Bread crumbs crackled under their restless feet.

Denis wiped sweat of exertion from his face and palms. "See?" he said, still a bit breathless from the descent. "Nothing anywhere, is there?"

Silence, while the light danced over shelves, call-number signs, and the dingy cement floor. Then George said, "I don't see anything."

Denis heard the harshness of reluctance in his tone, and said, "Let me have the flash, then, and we'll make sure once and for all that the Pale Thing That Laughs is only a figment of your imagination."

"It is," he said, and turned out the light.

"Why George!" Denis cried, almost genially. "I believe you've learned something from these past two years, after all. So you know I was going to take the light and leave you locked in till morning with your imagination, and now you want to do unto me instead. Come to think of it, your whole tale of a Thing must have been made up just to lure me down here."

"You might say that." His voice came from close by. He should have been up the stairs by now. Denis continued to hold him in cunning converse, extravagantly praising his cleverness, while padfooting in his direction as silently as possible, wishing those crumbs on the floor had been greasier. At length Denis ran his nose into a row of buckram spines, and in regaining his balance grasped a cotton-sleeved arm. He laughed.

"'Nor hell a fury like an author scorned,' huh George? You really ought to learn about correct quotation from me. What say? Shall we call it a drawn game and get out of this place? Say one practical joke cancels another."

George's voice was still harsh, sullen. "My joke . . . my joke is more practical than yours."

"*Is?* Not *was?*" Denis seemed to smell something like dampness on old carpets. He gripped the sleeve tighter. "How's that, George? There isn't really a Pale Thing That Laughs down here . . . is there?"

"No." George put his hand on Denis's neck. A shaggy hand, with claws. "But there is a Thing That Changes in the Dark."

The Real Road to the Church

ROBERT AICKMAN

BUT WAS that the true meaning? "*Le vrai chemin de l'église?*" The overtones of symbolism and conversion seemed clear enough, but Rosa still rather wondered whether the significance of the phrase was not wholly topographical. One could so easily read far too much into the traditional usages of simple people.

Probably all that was meant was the simplest and directest route (and perhaps the ancientest); the alternative to the new (but no longer very new) and metalled main road that wound along the borders of properties, instead of creeping through them. Though by now, Rosa reflected, all roads had begun to barge through once again, and no longer went courteously around and about. Very much so: *that*, she thought, was symbolic, if anything was. Of everything: of the changed world outside and also of her own questionable place in it. But when one began to think in that way, all things become symbolic of all other things. Not that that was in itself untrue: though it was only *one* truth, of course. And when one *admitted* that there were many truths existing concurrently, upon which of them could one possibly be thought to stand firm—let alone, to rest? Almost certainly, the simple people who used that phrase, gave no thought at all to its meaning. It was a convention only, as are the left hand side and the right. Conventions are, indeed, all that shield us from the shivering void, though often they do so but poorly and desperately.

As a matter of fact, Rosa was shivering now as she stood in the living room of La Wide (if living room it could yet be called) and thought about the tone in which Mrs. Du Quesne, her newly found home help with the aristocratic name, had spoken. Nor was it only Mrs. Du

Quesne's name that seemed to echo breeding. Rosa had read many books during those years she spent abroad; read them mainly, as it had since seemed to her, while waiting for men to keep some appointment or other; and Mrs. Du Quesne had brought back Tess of the D'Ubervilles to her mind, though Mrs. Du Quesne was far, far older than Tess had been permitted to be.

Rosa's convent French, though presumably reinforced during the year or two she had lived in Paris (but always with men who were English) was of little avail in understanding the island tongue: not so much a patois, she gathered, as a hybrid, a speech half-Latin and half-Norse. At one period, Rosa had lived in Stockholm with an actual Swede (far and away the worst year of her life—or more than a year: it had all ended in her breakdown), but the language of Sweden (and never would she forget the pitch of it) seemed to have nothing whatever in common with the language of Mrs. Du Quesne and her friends. If Mrs. Du Quesne had not mixed in equal parts of very clear English, Rosa could hardly have employed her. There were not many left who spoke the local tongue at all; but that was a factor which strongly inclined Rosa to employ, and thus, perhaps, aid, those who did. Any resulting difficulty or sacrifice she fervently justified to herself.

Rosa was fairly well aware that it was the more oracular remarks which Mrs. Du Quesne and her friends left in their natal hybrid, nor could by any reasonable persuasion be induced to anglicize. She suspected, indeed, that just now she herself had gone somewhat beyond persuasion that was reasonable. She was sure she had begun to croak, when her gullet had suddenly dried around what had been her voice; and that she had pounded several times upon the Du Quesne kitchen table (except that neither table nor kitchen were the words they all used). When it came to the choice, no doubt important in its way, between one three-letter washing powder and another, Mrs. Du Quesne spoke plain advertisers' English; but her warnings, or at least admonitions, deeper and more personal to Rosa and her place of abode, were as masked as the gurgling of any ancient oracle. And everyone else in the kitchen that was called something else, kept quiet when Mrs. Du Quesne said these plainly important things. Probably those sitting around at Delphi fell silent in like circumstances.

And there could be no doubt at all about La Wide having been

unoccupied for years and years before she, Rosa, had bought it. The very first thing she had thought when she had set eyes on it had been "It must be haunted," but it had not so far in her occupancy seemed to be so, and the first twelvemonth was almost over, albeit a casual visitor might not have thought it from the state of the rooms.

The fact that the little structure had been so cheap as to be within Rosa's means had also made her suspect that trouble went with it. She had not been so unsophisticated as not to think of that. But during the year she had realized that on this point the answer might lie elsewhere.

The explanation, she had come to suspect, lay in the present social categorization of the island population. First, there were the few immensely old families, who dwelt in crumbling châteaux, within weedy moats. Second, there were the tax refugees from the British mainland: sad, very loud-voiced people in once-fashionable clothes who seemed not to have houses at all, but to reside always in not quite compatible bars and restaurants, never truly drunk, never truly sober. Third, there were the great residential majority: the prosperous growers, their suppliers and agents. These lived in new or rehabilitated bungalows or houses, frantically competitive, each with all the others. Finally, there were the few real natives or aboriginals; and they had so diminished in number under the weight of all the others, or of the times in general, that they no longer needed more than a proportion of the cots and crofts built for them, mostly in the solidest, most enduring stone. The first three groups would not have considered La Wide, and the fourth had no need of it. The end of the tomato boom was said to be imminent, but in that event, those who trimmed and watered it would migrate not to La Wide but more probably to the Antipodes.

Moreover, La Wide was to be reached only by a bumpy and neglected track running uphill between hedges: difficult for a baby carriage, impossible for a saloon car. It was, in fact, this track that had initiated the dark talk from Mrs. Du Quesne and her group; Rosa having expressed concern about the difficulty Mrs. Du Quesne might find in making her way during the season of winter wet that once more lay ahead. (Rosa had arrived the previous October, but then, and right through that winter, there had been no Mrs. Du Quesne in her life.)

Rosa, still shivering, sank upon a chair by the small fireplace as she thought about what had been said; though, as far as she was concerned,

she but slenderly understood. "I am far too sensitive," she thought, for the five hundredth or one thousandth time; though words had never been necessary to frame the thought. She was in such distress (surely, this time, without full justification) that she might have gone on to think "I am mad," and thus derive some faint, familiar comfort from the implication of nonresponsibility for what happened to her and of escape, but instead was struck by the idea that, in this case, the word "sensitive" might require to be applied in a new meaning. Dennis, fifteen years ago, had said at first that he thought she might be "a sensitive," and indeed claimed that it was one reason why he was "interested in her." He always professed a special concern with such things, and could certainly talk without end about them, though perhaps without much meaning either. He had, however, quite soon found an Indo-Chinese girl who was far more of a sensitive, and was believed, in so far as you could believe anything about Dennis, to have started living with her instead. Already, Dennis had explained to Rosa that being "a sensitive" had nothing at all to do with being "sensitive" in the ordinary meaning of the word. Rosa had thought this just as well in all the circumstances, and had summoned resolution to exclude all notion of herself owning any special psychic status. She had hardly thought about it again until now. "If I *am* sensitive in that way," she thought, "then the Du Quesne lot may have sensed it." Whenever she visited Mrs. Du Quesne's abode, which she had found herself doing surprisingly frequently, she discovered a small crowd of kindred and affinity mumbling their confused lingo in the nonkitchen. "The Du Quesne lot" were fast becoming an over-wise chorus in the background of her own life; and perhaps edging towards the front of it.

Though it was already the end of October, there was no fire in the grate. This was partly because it was so difficult to get coal. Apparently the tomato-houses required almost all that was imported. The previous winter, Rosa had frozen for as long as eight or nine weeks before she had obtained a supply by making one of her scenes in the merchant's office. She had then received a whole ton, almost immediately, carried by a pair of youths in half-hundredweight sacks all the way up her lumpy lane from the road: which made her wonder whether coal was really so short, after all. Quite probably it was one of the many necessities only to be procured by such as she through resort to degrading

devices. Rosa was unsure whether she did not prefer to endure the cold. Then she reasoned with herself that winter had of course not even begun, and that even autumn was less than half gone. She rose, went through to the back room, her bedroom and boudoir, removed her sweater, glanced in the looking glass at the reflection of her bust, as she always did, and put on a thicker, chunkier sweater. The room was rather sad and dark, because the single window was close to the bank of earth which rose behind almost perpendicularly. Probably the room had been intended for "the children," while Father and Mother slept in the room adjoining, which was now Rosa's unfinished living room; and all had lived their waking lives in the remaining room, into which the outer door led, and which had now become Rosa's kitchen and scullery only. Rosa entered this kitchen and scullery, and started to slice up materials for a meal.

But that day it was her first meal her Mother could possibly have called "real," and it had the effect, with the coffee that followed it, of concentrating Rosa's perceptions. Mrs. Du Quesne had left her with much to be surmised, but the facts, or rather the claims, were clear, even though the overtones and explanations might not be.

It had begun when Mrs. Du Quesne, in a friendly way, had been answering one of the others who had apparently enquired for details as to where Rosa resided. "Ah," the other woman had blurted out, "it is there that they change the porters." Patois or hybrid the tongue might be, but Rosa could understand that much. "What porters?" she had enquired, her mind full of French railway stations. There had been a pause and a silence, and then something evasive had been said, though doubtless kindly meant. "No," Rosa had cried, the scent of mischief full in her nostrils. "I want to know. Please tell me." Mrs. Du Quesne then said something much firmer, and perhaps in a less kindly tone; and soon Rosa was beginning to lose control, in the way she now regretted. So, in the end, Mrs. Du Quesne did tell some of it, out of resentment or out of necessity. Mrs. Du Quesne explained certain aspects of the matter, while the others inserted quiet or excited comments in their vernacular.

All over the island, Mrs. Du Quesne had said, all over the island when one knew, were these paths: "*Les vrais chemins de l'église.*" It was the way one went to one's church—when one knew. Several other

things were said that Rosa had not comprehended. There was another pause and then the nub of the matter was hinted at: by these paths one also went to one's grave. Along these paths one's body was borne; and not only did such a path find its way past La Wide, so that each time the burden must pass within inches of Rosa's front door, but La Wide was also one of the places where, as she had heard already, "they changed the porters." Great significance seemed to be attached to that. And everyone made it clear that to make one's last journey by any other route was most inappropriate. Words were used to describe the consequence which, though few, were impressive, so awed and reluctant was their utterance, so charged the silence that followed them. Rosa had no precise idea what these words meant, but they had made those dead who were unquiet, almost visible and tangible in Mrs. Du Quesne's homestead.

"But," Rosa had, in the end, cried out, "but I have never heard *anything*." She thought that at this point she had actually clutched at Mrs. Du Quesne's sleeve.

"No," Mrs. Du Quesne had replied, very simply and memorably. "Until now you hadn't the knowledge." And everyone was again silent after she had spoken.

Rosa could not see how that could possibly make a difference. Either these dreary corteges went past, in which case she would have surely seen at least one of them in a whole year; or they did not, and she had somehow missed the whole point.

"And whatever happens," said Mrs. Du Quesne rather loudly, "if you *do* hear, don't look." Everyone continued silent; not one of them even nodding.

And what was more, she had learned nothing further. There had been some more talk, either in the difficult tongue, or else merely silly. Soon, Rosa had stalked out.

Now she looked around at the half-completed repainting and the miscellany of furniture brought from her room in London. It had been costly to move, of course, but it was certainly not true that it would have been cheaper to buy new furniture on the island. New furniture might have been more agreeable and more appropriate, but it would finally have emptied Rosa's financial store. As for the painting, she had set about doing it herself for the same reason, and because she thought

it would give her something to do before she started looking for a thing that was better, but had been surprised by the physical effort involved, and, some time ago, had desisted until she had more strength. By now, she had ceased to notice the result for most of the time, though at this moment she did notice it. Properly, as she well knew, she could not afford even Mrs. Du Quesne, but truly she could not do *everything*, and Mrs. Du Quesne also provided a certain company—cheerful and confident company for much of the time. Besides, Mrs. Du Quesne cost very little.

That, indeed, was why it had been possible to employ her, when a woman requiring the open market rate would have been out of the question; but at this moment it struck Rosa for the first time that Mrs. Du Quesne's cheapness was like the cheapness of the house: slightly unnatural. Unaccustomed cheapness is something that takes much explanation in the world around us. It occurred to Rosa that perhaps she, Rosa, was beginning to regret having come at all, and that all these new difficulties and apprehensions were, as Dennis used to say, "projections." Nothing had been more familiar to Rosa than the sensation of early regret for almost every step she had ever taken; but this time she had thought that she had evaded the demon, even though perhaps by also managing to evade herself, for nearly a whole year. Where just now Rosa had undoubtedly been frightened, the notion that her external alarums had emanated, as so often, from inside her, left her merely depressed.

She looked at her reflection, though only in the glass of the sitting-room window. The light was just right for the purpose, and even the grime helped to define her image. Certainly it was all the definition she wanted. She had always found life to move by contraries, usually petty ones, though sometimes not; and, as often before when she had been depressed, now found herself surprised that she looked as well as she did. She had long ago learned that it was when she had been feeling more confident that the sight of her appearance came always as something of a shock. Life evens things up or down; in small matters and in large (even though Rosa would have hesitated to distinguish between the two). Now she felt quite pleased. Her figure was still noticeably good, or at least well proportioned; and the thick, chunky sweater was in her right style. Even her face was still pretty, she thought, beneath

the grey hair. At least she had the decency to keep her grey hair short: but then there had been a man who positively liked, and chose, short grey hair—though that, for better or for worse, had been when her own hair was neither, but carrotty and rather long. Still, long grey hair always looked greasy and witch-like; and at once she thought anew of Mrs. Du Quesne, though Mrs. Du Quesne's hair was not grey at all, but quite black. "And my skin is amazingly good for my age," Rosa thought to herself. (She had long ago made a decision to defer *talking* to herself for as long as she could.) She attempted a smile, though she knew it could only be a bitter one, at least for the most part. But it proved to be not so much a bitter smile, as a timid and frightened smile. She was smiling like a shaky adolescent. And then the image in the dirty window lost shape and identity. Rosa turned away, once more depressed.

She took down her coat from one of the pegs at the back of the door on to the lane and set out for a walk. It was a respectable and even an expensive coat. Rosa still spent far more on clothes than on "the home"—or, indeed, on anything else that was in the least optional. And they were ladylike, conventional clothes that she picked, though simpler than the convention, because she had taste. Though her adult life had so far divided into two phases, neither of them especially ladylike, she had felt from first to last that her appearance must always show what she *really* was. And now that she had entered upon a third phase, this limbo at La Wide, she divined that her appearance was almost all she was left with. It was something that need never fail her while she had two pennies to rub together, and had mercifully little to do with the quite independent aspect of her naked body, provided that she did not allow her grey hair to grow long and greasy, or her hands to go too far in the direction of, say, Mrs. Du Quesne's hands. With determination, she would be able to do something with her appearance, until the last day came. . . . She twisted her mind away from the thought of the morning's conversation.

Rosa was winding her way along the cliff path, high and narrow above the autumnal billows ("They are as grey as hair," thought Rosa); steeply up and vertiginously down, both billows and path. Rosa walked not fast but steadily: the cliff path ran for many miles, and was exceedingly wild and beautiful, recalling what the cliff paths of England were, the coastguard paths, well within living memory. The ascents and

descents, beyond either the powers or the will of the ordinary visitor, meant little to Rosa; but then the beauty and the wilderness meant little to her either, and the windblown cliff flora, the jagged, streaky geology, nothing at all. All these different things entered her awareness only vaguely. Almost every day, she went slowly on and on, in her good clothes; passing others, persons from the car parks behind, and men with guns, without acknowledgement of any kind, without one half-step aside, assuredly without a smile. "She looks just like a ghost," the women said, not understanding that she might conceivably have been one. "Didn't she look pale?" enquired other women rhetorically of their bored husbands. Rosa was one whom the weather affected little. "She looks like a madwoman," the bored husbands would sometimes reply. "Perhaps she's searching for something," a girl might interpose more sympathetically. And the crushing answer would come: "Most likely searching for her wits."

Rosa had thus walked for miles along the cliff path almost each day during all but a year, but now she soon began to feel tired and settled herself on a rough bench. She sat staring out to sea for possibly half an hour; letting the heavy waves erode her misery and break up her despair. Then a figure in black appeared on the path in the opposite direction to that from which she had come. A tall elderly man struggled forward against the wind. As he drew near, Rosa saw that he was in clerical dress, without an overcoat, and with his big black hat in his hand. His white hair was sparse and windblown. He stopped in front of Rosa and she looked up. Her first thought was: "A sensitive face."

"Good afternoon," said the man. "I believe you are Mrs. Hughes."

"Yes," said Rosa. "I am."

"You have bought the little house at the place where they change the porters? At least I assume that you have bought it."

"Yes," said Rosa. "I admit it."

"Are you seeking peace?"

"Aren't we all?" The cheap words had sprung to her lips on some volition of their own.

"Yes, Mrs. Hughes. Indeed, we all are. Indeed."

Rosa said nothing. She felt that any words she could find would be likewise unworthy of her; would show her in an unjust light. It was a long time since she had conversed with any "educated person."

"Perhaps I might sit beside you for a moment?"

Rosa nodded and, as one does, drew the skirt of her coat more closely to her.

"And what was your life before you came here? If you care to speak of it, of course."

"For the last eight years, I was a secretary. Then the manager sent for me and told me I was past being a secretary with *that* company, but that he had arranged for me to be transferred to the handling side. I said No."

"I am sure you were wise," said the man. "And what happened to you before the last eight years?" Both of them were staring straight ahead across the pulsing, empty sea.

"Before that I was seeing more of life."

"Did you prefer that?"

"No," replied Rosa. "I disliked both times." And, when he said nothing, she spoke again. "Who are *you*?"

"I am the curate in charge of your parish. I too am retired, but I come here every autumn in order to permit your rector to rest. He is very elderly, even more so than I am, and, alas, very infirm indeed, as I expect you know."

"No," said Rosa, once more defiant, as always when confronted with any kind of official demand. "I don't go to church."

"Possibly not," said the man. "But then you have no need to."

"I wonder how you know," said Rosa, cheaper than ever, and misunderstanding.

"You already live in a holy place."

"What's that?" asked Rosa, her heart in a sudden vice.

"I myself should not dare to live there."

"Tell me," said Rosa, with all the stolidity she could muster. "What exactly is there that I should be afraid of?"

"It is not a matter of anything to fear in the usual sense. It is a spiritual matter."

"As how? I don't know about such things."

"Oh," he said. "Where were you educated?"

"In a convent," she replied, more quietly. "But I've long ago forgotten everything I was taught."

He replied in a murmur, as if to himself. "I can hear the beating of your heart."

But having said that, he said nothing more, while Rosa sat waiting, almost peacefully, for whatever might befall.

"I come here daily," he said in the end. "I like to contemplate the immensity. There is a lack of immensity in the world. Do you find that also?"

"Yes," said Rosa. "I suppose I do. But I don't look very much for it. I don't look very much for anything."

"It is perhaps odd," he continued, "that we have not met until now. I believe that you too walk along the cliff."

"Yes," said Rosa. "And I may have passed you without noticing. I do that often."

"I think I should have noticed *you*," he said, as if seriously thinking about it.

Rosa noticed that upon the grey sea was now the beginning of a black shadow.

"This," she remarked, "is when my Mother would have said 'The days are drawing in.' "

"Yes," he replied. "Soon we shall have to light the lamp before teatime."

A sea bird descended from the blackening clouds, screaming and searching.

"You haven't told me," said Rosa. "This thing about changing the porters. People seem to keep talking about it. It sounds rather pointless to me. And, anyway, it doesn't happen. I've been there nearly a year and it hasn't happened yet, as far as I know."

"Perhaps you have not known what to look for and to listen for? The porters are changed very quietly. No one speaks. No one grumbles. Surely you have not been given the impression that they go by shouting, like a trade union march?"

"I have to admit," said Rosa, taking the plunge, "that I never heard about it at all until this morning, and then only from my char, if that is what I should call her. She said the great thing was if I *did* hear anything, not to look for what it was."

"It is a disturbing sight for those unaccustomed to death and the

hereafter: which is most of the world around us, as I need hardly say. I think that you are one, Mrs. Hughes, who could not only listen and look, but kneel and touch with impunity."

"Do I really want to?" asked Rosa, turning to him completely for the first time.

"O yes indeed, Mrs. Hughes," he replied. "To kneel and to touch are the proper practices of the pilgrim. That must be one of the things you have temporarily forgotten."

"As with saints and relics and so forth?"

He smiled at her for the first time.

"But what should I get out of it?" She blushed. "No, I don't quite mean that. What I mean is why me? Why should I be supposed to do it more than another?"

"Because, Mrs. Hughes, your whole life has been a quest for perfection. You have always been concerned only with perfection, and as in this world there is no perfection, you are sad. Sadness can be a very special—shall I say, concession?"

"I am sure the nuns used to tell us it was a sin."

"As with so many things, it depends upon what kind of sadness it is."

"Do you know," said Rosa impulsively, "I'm not sure that you haven't changed my entire afternoon!"

"Where you now live," he replied, "there was for centuries a shrine with an image; and before that, probably on the very same spot, another image, very different and yet in important ways just the same; and, before that—who knows?—perhaps the goddess herself, in propria persona, if you will permit the words. Needless to say, no one could behold the goddess herself in her grove and continue to live. That is possible only when the divine is provisionally mediated into man."

"For a clergyman you seem to take stock in an awful lot of different gods."

"There is only one."

"Yes," she said. "I see that too. At least I do now. You seem to make me understand things that I never understood before. And yet you don't say anything that's in the least new."

"Daily life is entirely a matter of the pattern men and women impose upon it: of style, as the artist calls it. And the character of that pattern is very important, as day follows day. None the less, reality lies

far behind, and is unchangeable: is ritual, in fact. It was of reality, I suspect, that your charwoman was speaking—perhaps gossiping. Reality is often dangerous, so she was cautioning you to avoid it.”

“And you?”

“I advise you to advance towards it. When you hear the faint sounds I spoke of, throw open your door and see what there is to see. Fall upon your knees and stretch out your hand, as I said. And of course be prepared for a big change; something indescribable, unpredictable.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” said Rosa slowly.

“Few have. My general reputation in the parish is that of a complete visionary. I am said to go around upsetting people. Not that many care one way or the other.” On the instant, he rose to his feet. “But now I must return to them. I am very glad indeed to have met you, Mrs. Hughes.” As he could not lift his hat, he waved it vaguely around. She had a few seconds in which to examine his full face closely.

“I understand almost nothing you have said,” Rosa repeated. “And yet you have made me feel much better. Thank you.”

She would have gone after him along the cliff path, had he proposed it, but he did not. He merely bowed slightly and strode rapidly away. For a minute or so in the dusk, she could see his long black shape flickering and capering like a scrap of burned paper blown along by the wind, but soon he was no longer visible.

A heavy raindrop fell upon the back of her left hand. She looked up. The sky was now really black, with a blackness that was not entirely of the oncoming night. There was nothing to do but make the best speed possible homewards. But though she scuttled along more swiftly than for a long time, she failed to glimpse the shape ahead of the man who had been speaking to her. The visibility was so poor as to make the rough path almost dangerous; and when Rosa at last re-entered La Wide, her good clothes and she herself were saturated more completely than ever before in her life, save perhaps once, that day in the Bois de Vincennes, of all places, with Dennis. People looked down their noses at the Bois de Vincennes, but when the rain began, it had proved astonishingly wild and shelterless. Then Rosa recalled that she was wrong. The man with whom she had shared a soaking had not been Dennis but Michael: vile, bloody, deceitful, dear old Mike.

There was no electricity at La Wide. For lighting she depended

upon lamps, exactly as her new acquaintance had said; and the oil supply for them had been another of the wearing nuisances which she hoped that Mrs. Du Quesne would be able to deal with better than she had. At least, she, Rosa, would not have to listen to the supplier's patronizing comments upon her backward and impoverished existence. But now, before lighting a lamp, she stripped off all her clothes in the almost total darkness and flung them about the floor.

Dennis, Michael, Oskar, Ted, Tom, Frank, Gwyn, and Elvington: those were some of the names, and what comic names they were! Rosa ignited a pair of lamps, then lined the men up in her mind. It was possibly the first time ever that she had deliberately done so, and, perhaps for that reason, some of the names had no proper faces, and certain other faces that she saw, peering and intruding from the darker areas, had no names. And after those days, during her years of respectable and responsible business life, there had been virtually no men at all; assuredly none with power over her. She took out an unused bath towel and rubbed herself vigorously. Then she put on another sweater and a pair of trousers, which she seldom wore; and over them her thick winter dressing gown. All these things felt pleasantly new, one after the other. The dressing gown she had had cleaned during the summer, so that it smelt impersonally of chemicals. The file of men had soon vanished; without even being dismissed. It was as if on their own they had marched away into life's battle and failed to return.

What had happened to them: to them as individuals? It was another thought upon which Rosa had seldom dwelt. In almost every case, her final and consuming idea had been simply to get away, and to drag her sagging heart away also. She had sought to avoid all thought of the man's continuing existence. And then when another man had appeared, it had been even more important not to reflect much upon the past. All she could now recollect was that Elvington, poor weak American boy, had destroyed himself with the contents of a killing bottle, though not on her account, but whole years later; and that big, fat Oskar had been actually killed, Scandinavian-style, in a fight, and a fight that was at least partly about her. Afterwards she had collapsed completely, very completely; and had had to be fetched back to England "under sedation" (and as cheaply as possible) by her half-sister, Judith. Frank was supposed to have perished in a car smash outside Bolton, where he had,

at rather long last, found a job of some kind. It was her room-mate, Agnes, who had told her that, and professed herself willing to swear to it; but one could not rely upon Agnes even when she probably *wished* to speak the truth. Agnes had also said that Frank had been married only a week before the accident. . . . All the rest of them were quite possibly still alive. Rosa wondered how many of them would reach Heaven, and how many of their respective women, and what would happen to them all then. She was still not seeing them standing in a line, as they had been doing, ten, twenty, or thirty minutes ago. Rosa had often noticed that such inner visions come upon one apparently unsolicited; soon vanish; and can by no effort be recaptured. She uncrossed her legs and said out loud: "We control nothing of importance that happens to us."

She realized that she had not yet rubbed her hair, except to prevent it actually dripping upon her dry clothes. The new towel was soaking wet and quite unsuitable. She took out another new towel, leaving but one more on the pile. Seated on a hard chair, she rubbed away at her head, feeling active and effective. Then she had to consider what to do with two wringing wet towels, and several very humid garments. It really was not cold enough to justify the lighting of a fire. Rosa felt so full of vigour that she almost regretted this. She settled for ranging the wet objects upon strings which she stretched round the room. Fortunately, several pegs and hooks had been left behind in odd places, to which the strings could be tied; but the total effect was unconvincing, and more than a little eerie. There were new shadows, some of them vast; and intermittent small shiftings and flappings. "I feel penned in by wet vampire bats," thought Rosa; but, as a matter of fact, the feeling was far more alarming than that, and far less specific.

"This is my hour of trial," said Rosa. "It is like nothing that has gone before." She realized that she was disregarding her strong resolve not to soliloquise out loud before she positively could not help herself. "Perhaps," she thought, but did not say, "this is where I *cannot* help myself." She closed her eyes, to shut out the big, frightening bats. She crossed her arms over her bosom, placing a hand upon each opposite shoulder. She started to breathe very deeply and regularly: formally terminating the period of short gasps and panting that had attended her scrambling rush for home, and the self-pummellings and fetchings

that had necessarily followed. Soon she found that her crossed arms weighed upon her lungs, so that, while mysteriously glad that she had passed through that position, she fell away, letting her hands fade in her lap.

There were clocks, one of which struck the hours and the half-hours; there was a cricket, which, so late in the year, activated itself for astonishingly long periods; there were the two lamps, in which the oil burned evenly away.

"This is amounting to a wake," said Rosa to herself, as the clock suddenly struck ten. "Not to mention a fast."

Her limbs had become a little stiff, but she was surprised that things were not far worse. She had felt herself to be slightly exalted ever since her conversation on the cliffs, and this unreasonable restlessness seemed to confirm it.

All the same, she moved to a more comfortable chair. "Why ever not?" she enquired vaguely, and once more aloud. She noticed that the rain had stopped. Perhaps it had stopped hours ago.

The room seemed peculiarly warm. "Perhaps delusions are setting in." Rosa had read about explorers marooned on ice-floes who dreamed of the Savoy Grill. Ted had once worked as a waiter in a place like that, as she was unlikely to forget—though, as a waiter, Ted was understood to be rather good. Rosa cast off her dressing gown.

The clock struck half past ten, eleven, and half past eleven. Rosa was now half-asleep for much of the time. She had abandoned all idea of special preparation for what lay ahead. She lay empty and resigned.

Some time after that, the flame in both lamps began to flicker and waver. Rosa had filled the lamps herself and knew well that they held enough oil to last through two nights and more. But she rose to her feet very conventionally, in order to make an inspection. Immediately, the two lamps went out. The flame in both seemed to vanish at exactly the same moment, as if by pre-arrangement.

Rosa realized that, in the dark, her brow was covered with moisture. She was uncertain whether this was fear, or a medical consequence of her previous soaking, or simply the temperature of the room. Certainly the room was quite unaccountably hot.

Then Rosa became aware that behind the patterned curtains she had drawn across the two windows before throwing off her clothes, was now

a gleam that seemed more than the contrast between the blackness of the room and the perhaps slightly more luminous night outside. Moreover, it was as if the gleam was moving. The faint light was strengthening, as, presumably, it moved towards her.

So far she had heard nothing but the ticking of the clock; and now she ceased to hear even that. She had not noted the clock's last tick. She simply realized that it was ticking no longer.

"Oh God," said Rosa, "please protect me." She had not chosen either the words or the voice. She had, in fact, no idea where they had come from. She sank, not upon her knees, but in a heap on the floor, burying her face between her legs, and holding her hands over her ears. She seemed to squat, in desperate discomfort, for an appreciable time. In an earlier year, she had known something like that hopeless, inhuman posture when she had been so badly seasick—and on more than one occasion—in the Baltic.

Then there was a faint fluttering knock, not necessarily at the outer door. Rosa could not tell where it came from. It might have been made by a small creature which had been entrapped in the room with her.

It seemed worse not to know than to know. Rosa unwound herself. She looked and listened.

There was still not much to hear, but the light had grown strong enough for the shapes she had hung from strings to be dimly and strangely visible. Another new development was, however, that these distorted forms seemed no longer to be entirely within the room, but to continue outside it, as if she could see faintly through the wall. The weak light, moreover, was wanly pink and wanly blue, in a way that not even the pattern of the curtains could entirely account for.

Punching at the wet objects that touched her face and head, Rosa ran for the outer door. Though it too seemed to have become faintly transparent, it opened quite normally. Rosa was in flight, and in flight that was unorganized and demented. No longer was she capable of resignation or acquiescence, let alone of meeting with anything more positive. But at the doorway, she managed to stop herself. She stood there for a moment, gasping and staring.

She had half expected that the light would be very bright. After all, there had been evidence that it might be.

In fact, however, it was quite faint; only half as bright again, perhaps,

as it had been inside the room. Remote might have been the word for the quality of it; even though the source, or seeming source, was almost under Rosa's nose; *le vrai chemin de l'église* not being at all wide. The light came from candles, but, mysteriously, it still manifested that wan pinkness and pale blueness that Rosa had already discerned. "Inexplicable," said Rosa softly, "inexplicable."

It was hard even to guess how many of these candles there were, each giving barely more than the light of a tiny taper, though visibly sturdier than that. The candles were in the hands of men; and inside the irregular ring the men made, were other men, without candles: the bearers (Rosa rejected the word "porters"), now in process of being changed. And at the centre of all was that which was being borne: of itself, apparently, not without luminosity.

After Rosa had opened the door, very far from quietly, owing to the clumsiness of her fear, the men on that side of the ring, whether the light-bearers or the burden-bearers, had slowly and gravely moved aside, so that a wide way lay open before her.

Already she was part of it all, and had no refuge. She went delicately and timidly out, stepping like a girl.

And what she saw lying before her, though gilded and decked and perfumed and beflowered as any saint, was the twin, the image, the double of herself. Not even of herself when a girl or of herself when a hag, but, she had no doubt about it, of herself as she was now. On the instant she sank to her knees beside the litter and diffidently touched the hand that lay there, which at once responded with a gentle clasp.

"Who am I?" whispered Rosa. "And who are you?"

"I am your soul," replied a remote voice she did not know.

"But," cried Rosa, "where then are you going?"

"To the church. Where else should a soul go?"

"Shall I see you no more?"

"One day."

"When will that be?"

"I do not know."

"And until then?"

"Live. Forget and live."

"How can I forget? How can anyone? How can anyone *forget*?"

Here Rosa glanced upwards and around her; and the idea passed

through her mind that these silent men, all somehow ministering, it was to be supposed, to her soul, might be those same men for whom earlier that evening she had sometimes found names and sometimes found recollections only.

Whatever the truth of that, Rosa's last question found no answer. The new bearers were assuming their task. (Who, Rosa wondered, in that case—if that case were conceivable, could *they* be?) With hands and arms, they had already drawn Rosa away; and now they were raising the litter on to their shoulders. The entire faintly lighted throng were moving on towards the hilltop, where the church had replaced the temple, where the temple had been surrogate for the goddess personally in the grove.

"Farewell." Rosa never knew whether she had actually spoken that word.

Remarkably soon, the rough lane was silent, with all life stilled, and starlessly dark. But Rosa saw through the curtained windows that the lamps inside her living room burned as usual; and when, not too hurriedly, she went to look and listen, the clock was ticking, and implying that the time was only ten minutes after midnight.

It was no occasion for giving further thought to the problem of the wet clothes. That could wait for the morning, when Rosa would be packing anyway, with a view to returning to London, at least as a first move. It was impossible to know where she would go thereafter.

The Gods of Earth

GARY MYERS

NATH-HORTHATH, and Nasht, and Kaman-Thah: these are the gods of Earth, whom men in the Dreamlands name the Elder Gods. To them is the incense burnt in the Temple of the Elder Gods, that the prayers of men may ascend to them on the smoke; for the Great Ones dwell in their onyx castle atop unknown Kadath in the Cold Waste, and frequent also lesser peaks.

On the snowy peak of Hatheg-Kla brooded the gods of Earth beneath the stars, when a lost dream came fluttering weakly by them. And Kaman-Thah caught the dream in his cupped hands; and Nasht blew the frost from off its lacy wings, and so disclosed the beautiful city of rose-coloured marble, with the green fields roundabout; and Nath-Horthath traced the trademark of MANA-YOOD-SUSHAI, and the following designation, in Yannish: "Peabody, if he drink rum." Thus it was revealed to the gods that Peabody was an accomplished dreamer in his cups.

Now, there is a heresy in the Dreamlands, which holds that the Elder Gods are not the elder gods indeed, for there were Other Gods before them: the Great Old Ones, the evil spawn of the daemon sultan Azathoth, whose name no lips dare speak aloud. When the Elder Gods sailed to Earth in their ships of cloud in an age predating Man, from red Betelgeuse in the starry sky, they found those monstrous Other Gods dreaming hideously, and bound Them under the hills with an Elder Sign, lest They should wake from hideously dreaming. But now the Other Gods protect the weak Elder Ones against the incursions of

men and daemons, until the Other Gods shall wake to take Their own revenge. Once the Elder Gods sought refuge in a city dreamed by Randolph Carter, but the Other Gods brought them home.

The gods of Earth left that discarded dream of Peabody on the snowy peak of Hatheg-Kla; but boarded their ships of cloud, and sailed toward that municipal park of the waking world, where Peabody was wont to dream at night. There they found him on his bench, wrapped in those journals which were so soon to become the scripture of a religion. And the gods, very awful and mysterious in their long grey cloaks beneath the stars, looked like policemen moving Peabody on. But they reassured him, saying: "We are the gods of Earth." And they caused the concrete walk to flower beneath their feet for a token.

Then Peabody asked what it was about. And they told him of the Dreamlands where they were the Elder Gods, of how there were none like them even in myth. They spoke of the white temples of Celephais, in the valley of Ooth-Nargai beyond the Tanarian Hills; and of the quaint, thatched cottages of Nithy-Vash, on the grassy slope that runs down to the azure Cerenarian Sea. All these they would trade him, they said, for the mere estates of his dreams. But Peabody told the gods how once he has found a keg under some stones in a shady wood, and so imagined Oomdroom, the citadel of brass, whose clashing gates are the thunder; and Lorlith the flowery country, whose perfume, wafted a thousand leagues over the blue water of the Moodish Sea, is the beacon of ships even to the ports of Nolly.

Then the gods spoke of the kinds of incense burnt in the Temple of the Elder Gods; of how he should have the worship of all human folk; of that species of immortality which is divine. And Peabody said that the whiskey they sold you in a certain tavern in Kingsport was enough paradise for any man.

The gods withdrew and secretly conferred. And when they returned to Peabody, it was in his audience hall at Ong, where the tapestried walls depicted scenes of the hunting of the unicorn, the sphinx, and the kangaroo.* Everyone there prostrated himself before the Elder Gods, everyone but Peabody, nodding on his ivory throne.

And the gods said: "There is wine in the Dreamlands." And Peabody

*Peabody had never seen the kangaroo, and deemed it fabulous.

opened one bloodshot eye at that. "It is good wine," said the gods. And Peabody said that all wine was good, but both his eyes were open now. And Kaman-Thah took a decanter from under his cloak, and decanted a purple wine into a crystal goblet. And Peabody's eyes sparkled no less than the purple wine. And he dreamed the diamond palace of Glastalon to be the glory of the province of Zeed, because of the bouquet of that splendid wine.

And while Kaman-Thah withheld the brimming goblet from Peabody's eager hands, the gods told him how in the cellars of Kadath were also stored, in addition to any wine you could name: the fermented sap of a tree unlike any other, which had grown from a seed dropt down by someone on the Moon; and Gorgondy, sinfully brewed by the gnomes; and a nameless distillation that is bottled in rubies hollowed and grotesquely carved; and the heady red wine of Sarrub, whose like is not in the World. And Kaman-Thah gave Peabody to drink of the splendid purple wine.

Midway up the obsidian precipice above Shadoleth, a picker of samphire entered a cleft, and so discovered what no man had seen before him. But he never came out, and the secret is safe for another million years. And on his ivory throne at Ong, Peabody wiped his lips on his embroidered sleeve, and said it was a deal. And the ivory throne was suddenly empty.

Now, when the gods of Ong had congratulated themselves upon that clever evasion of the doom they had feared, they lit tapers, and explored their castle of Ong. And they found that famous treasure-room of Ong, where the gold spilled out of a cupboard, and the gems could be viewed only through pieces of coloured glass. And there was dust on the floor of the treasure-room of Ong; but the floor was swept clean in that lofty room where had paced nightly, one trying to imagine the only thing needful to his drunkard's soul, between tiers of bottles full of tinted smoke, that had made even optimism despair. There the gods amused themselves by heating some bottled imps over their tapers, and sending the incandescent imps to flit below the murky ceiling, lighting astonishing frescoes. Then they returned to their audience hall, praising the fancy of Peabody.

One by one, the prostrate courtiers slithered backwards out of that hall, while the little flames in the hanging lamps turned green; and one

by one there sounded, far off, the gongs that presage delirium. And Kaman-Thah edged away from the sinister bulge of a tapestry, and wondered if mere moths could grow so big; and Nasht pressed his long ear to the floor, heard the scratching beneath, and perceived that his doom was upon him; and Nath-Horthath strode boldly to that portal standing ajar, and, having looked without, slammed and bolted it.

And the countries of his fancy fell away from Peabody, but his eyes were not on them now. He steered his ship of cloud into that aethereal stream, the wind that fans the stars; and soon there twinkled, far below him, the cheering lights of the habitable parts of the Dreamlands. And he steered north by the stars; and the lesser peaks of Earth marched splendidly by him; and the dark sea rolled beneath; and then unknown Kadath strode immensely up from the shadowy limits of the World, obstructing the heavens, eclipsing half the stars. . . .

Crouching behind the cellar door, the Other Gods waited Their turn to be the gods of Earth.

Walls of Yellow Clay

ROBERT E. GILBERT

SOMETHING roamed in my basement every night. It was large, because it occasionally thumped against the hot air ducts from the furnace or the floor joists. The only way the thing could have entered the basement would have been for it to remove the lid over the coal chute on the outside of the house and go down into the coal bin that was almost empty, since this was summer. The outside entrance at the back of the house was securely barred, and the small windows were locked.

If this thing in the basement were large, it could be too big to pass through the coal chute. In that case, I wondered, where did it come from?

I had occasionally been brave enough in the morning after hearing movements in the basement to open the door in the hall at the head of the basement steps. Then I could smell an odor that I could not describe, but it was sickening. I had bottles of air freshener all over the house, but they did not mask that alien effluvium.

My name was Edgar Clark, but I knew people called me Crazy Clark. If I had not been in the mental ward so much, I might have asked the police for help, but they knew me, having taken me to the hospital several times. Perhaps it would have been better if they had taken me away again. At least I would have been safe from whatever it was.

The basement in my house was peculiar. The part at the back did not seem to be as old as the house, but it was dug before the remainder of the excavations. The back part was under the kitchen and the porch.

It had a concrete wall around it and concrete steps leading down from outside. Mervyn Phillips, the previous owner of the house, broke through the concrete wall with a sledge hammer and started digging a tunnel toward the front of the house. He removed about a yard of yellow clay and stopped digging. He broke another entrance in the wall and dug a second tunnel to the front of the house. Phillips carried the clay up the back steps in a tub and hauled it in a ramshackle wheelbarrow to the end of the lot.

Under the front of the house, Phillips excavated a coal bin, a landing for steps, and a room for a furnace. He did all the work himself, and he was said to be not a particularly robust man. Mervyn Phillips surely had the mind of an Egyptian who helped build the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

On the day that Phillips finished his labors, he died with an unexpected heart attack.

One night, my warped mind, agitated by being unable to sleep because of the thing moving in the basement, generated all kinds of strange ideas. I began to wonder why Mervyn Phillips stopped digging the first tunnel to connect the front and back parts of the basement. The thought kept running through my head until I finally slept about the time the early birds started chirping in the trees around the house.

I awoke about 8:00 o'clock in the morning. My first thought was that I had to go down in the basement and look at Phillips' excavations. My second thought was that the thing haunting the basement might be waiting for me.

I took a flashlight and armed myself with an old saber that had hung for years in its rusty scabbard over the fireplace in my bedroom. I unlocked the door to the basement in the hall under the main stairs and quickly reached in and turned on the light switches. The sickening odor of the haunter swept into my face, and my empty stomach almost revolted. Nerving myself, I slowly descended the rough but sturdy basement steps with the saber blade probing the fetid air before me.

Part of the basement floor was hard-packed yellow clay, while the area around the furnace was concrete. I was startled to see how clean the floor was. The concrete looked as if it had just been poured. There were no longer remnants of the winter coal supply in the coal bin. There was not even any coal dust, but the clay floor and walls of the

bin were clean and smooth. The spider webs were gone from overhead, and I could see none of the cave crickets that had formerly infested the basement. I walked toward the furnace and found a heap of clean empty fruit jars piled in front of it. The gold-colored metal lids were in a separate pile.

I had inherited a quantity of jars of preserved fruit and vegetables from my sainted mother, but I could not bring myself to eat this food after she died, and the many jars had sat in the tunnel in moldering cardboard boxes for several years. I turned my flashlight down the tunnel that Mervyn Phillips had dug to connect the old rear of the basement with the new front. The tunnel was empty of boxes.

Stooping to avoid the hot air ducts and plumbing overhead, I moved into the tunnel and turned on the light that hung in the middle of the passage. Cautiously, I went to the dark rear room and flashed my light into it. The area was empty. Even the old wood and wire mesh potato bin was gone.

I turned on the light and found the floor, walls, and ceiling swept clean. I examined the broken concrete wall where Mervyn Phillips had started to dig his first tunnel. In the nineteen years that I had lived in the old house, I had never disturbed the sloping mass of clay inside the rough opening in the concrete.

I suddenly thrust the saber with all my strength into the dirt. The blade struck something that sounded like metal, and the reaction to the blow almost sprained my wrist.

With both hands on the hilt of the sword, I dug into the clay at the ground level. The yellow substance that would turn red when wet tumbled down around my feet. I uncovered a part of something buried in the ground.

I thought that Mervyn Phillips must have been a stolid man. In digging his first tunnel, he had found his way blocked by an inexplicable metal contraption, but he had left it alone, never mentioned it to anyone, and had patiently dug his tunnel in another place.

I rubbed my hands over the object. There were fins, and louvers, and tubes, and sockets, and knobs, and spheres, and cubes, and cylinders—it made no sense whatever. Of course I knew what it was. This was part of the starship that crashed in my garden.

I had not been physically able to tend a garden in several years, but

when I did have a garden, I was interested in the strange things that I found mixed with the soil that had been turned up by the plow. I found fragments of broken dishes, pieces of glass, rusted ironwork, oddly shaped bits of metal, and a number of marbles. I concluded that some child, perhaps fifty or a hundred years ago, had lost his marbles in what was now my garden.

The marbles were beautifully colored and had striking blots and splotches on their surfaces unlike anything I had seen before. It was not until I looked at one of the marbles under a powerful magnifying glass that I became frightened. I found that the darker sections had fine, blue, branching lines in them, and there were dots of various sizes with broken dashes beside them. There were extremely fine lines inscribed around the marble.

Feeling both a creepy fear and a mounting excitement, I examined the thirteen marbles I had found in the garden over a period of years. If I had not been a lifelong reader of science fiction, I might never have reached the conclusion that I did. These spheres were not a child's marbles; they were globes—maps of planets circling other stars somewhere in the Universe. I should have tried to obtain a magnifying glass that would have brought out all the details, including the names of continents and cities in an uncanny alphabet, but somehow I had an inkling that I already knew too much.

I did wonder why the globes were small as marbles. Perhaps the creatures who used them were the size of dolls, or perhaps the globes were made small to facilitate storage, and they could be enlarged when they were to be consulted.

After putting away the marbles in a drawer, I went to the tool shed attached to my somewhat rustic garage. There in a cardboard box were a few of the items that were scattered through the loam of my garden. I studied what I had thought were bits of broken dishes. The creepy feeling came back to my spine when I decided that the designs might not be works of art but printed words. The bits of metal could have been parts of almost anything, and what I had called corroded ironwork—some pieces were eight inches long—looked like nothing I had seen in a hardware store.

A spaceship crashed in what was now my garden centuries ago—surely before the discovery of America. Yes, that is what I, a science

fiction fan, concluded the debris in the garden indicated. It was the remains of an interstellar craft from some distant star in the Milky Way.

A deep excavation might have turned up larger pieces of the starship, but I, with my mental ward background, was not going to dig a big hole in the back yard. The neighbors would say, "Crazy Clark is off again. Get the police and the ambulance, and take him back to the loony bin."

Returning from my reverie in the basement, I turned out the light, went through the tunnel, and turned off the light there. I straightened my back under the higher ceiling beside the furnace. I had forgotten some of my fear in my puzzlement. Why were the fruit jars empty? Why were the floors and walls clean? Where was the potato bin? What—

Some instinct caused me to turn. There was a glowing greenish mass in the tunnel, and it was becoming larger. I turned my flashlight on it. The mass was coming out of the solid clay wall of the tunnel. I could smell it, and the odor was so powerful I could not breathe. The stuff was utterly loathsome. It looked like half-decayed chicken entrails sprinkled with fresh cow manure, mixed with parts of sea urchins and octopuses, intermingled with moldy fungi, dripping with sputum.

The filth seemed so putrid it could not possibly be alive, but it kept flowing out of the clay by some unnatural osmosis until it filled the tunnel up to the pipes and ducts. It began to flow toward me.

Suddenly realizing that it would cut me off from the steps, I ran. I pounded up the oak flight and through the doorway into the hall. I locked the basement door, and ran into my bedroom, and locked the door there.

Sagging against the panels, I slid down to the floor. My body was so cold that my teeth were chattering, although it was a hot summer day. I breathed in agonized gasps, and my heart thudded wildly in my chest. I gripped the saber and flashlight as if they were lifelines.

Judging from the noise it made, the obscenity in the basement evidently bumped into the furnace. I listened for the creaking of the steps, but there was no further sound.

I considered going to the window and yelling for help, but the neighbors would only think that Crazy Clark was having another of

his nervous breakdowns. Perhaps I had finally gone completely insane. What if I had only imagined the unearthly mess in the tunnel?

When I could breath naturally again, I stood up, dizzy and swaying, still clinging to the saber. The house made noises. I felt vibrations through the woodwork. Something heavy was moving in the living room.

I looked at the windows of my bedroom. I could unhook a screen and crawl out to safety, but that would leave the fetid slop in command of my home. I knew it was in the living room. If it could flow through a yellow clay wall, it could seep up through a wooden floor.

Then I looked at the candles and matches on the mantel and considered setting the house on fire. That might destroy the living slimy swill, but if it were in danger, it might just slip out through the wall. I could not bring myself to burn my home. I looked at the bookcases and the steel shelves that made my bedroom so crowded. They were filled with books and magazines—chiefly science fiction—on which I had spent too much money through the years. I could not burn them.

Was the house really jolting from the movements of something in the living room, or was I going insane? Should I go to the window and yell for the police? I had no doubt that the neighbors would call the police readily enough, but would the officers believe my story, or would they merely haul me away to the hospital again?

I had to know if I was still sane. I had to confront the blasphemous creature that had invaded my home and somehow destroy it. In my agitation, I had almost forgotten my theory that a starship crashed centuries ago in my garden.

Unlocking the bedroom door, I stepped into the hall. The door to the living room was open, and the window shades were down, but there seemed to be a greenish light in the room. I walked across the hall, and my heart began to pound again. My stomach heaved, because I could smell the alien feter.

I took one step into the living room. What had once been a living room and dining room was now one space, since Mervyn Phillips had removed the dividing partition, weakening the whole house. In the rear of this long room stood a man so large that he was bent over with his head and shoulders against the ceiling.

The giant wore a ragged undershirt and wrinkled grimy overalls. His

clothing and his face glowed so that there were no shadows on the greenish surfaces. His vast mouth opened, and he spoke softly. "Don't be afeered uh me. I ain't gonna hurt yuh," he said.

Slowly, the great stinking man crossed his enormous legs and sat on the floor, causing the boards and timbers of the room to make protesting noises. He looked at me over the couch that was turned across the middle of the room, and he was so tall that his head was still not far from the ceiling.

I stood rigid, paralyzed with a classic fear—fear of the unknown. I had a thought that I might drop dead at any second, since I had been in poor health for several years.

"Will yuh gimme some help?" the giant asked.

I could not speak. I could not do anything.

"Yuh could say I'm Mervyn Phillips," the giant said, "but I reckon that ain't quite right. I ain't got a name. That ain't air way. Mervyn Phillips died when he seen me in the cellar. It was the first time I felt well enough to come out, an he was there, an he seen me, an he died. I absorbed his brain. That's how come I talk yore langwidge just like Mervyn Phillips. I've got his brain."

I heard sounds coming out of my mouth as I said, "But Phillips died twenty years ago."

"What's years?" the giant responded, and there was actually a grin on his broad face. "My time ain't yore time. I kin go on slow time ur fast time. I may have been here fer hundreds of yore years, but it seems like just a couple uh weeks to me. How else could I come here from a star?"

"What star?" I asked.

"I don't know what yore perfessers call it. Mervyn Phillips hardly ever looked at a star."

"How many light-years away?" I said.

The giant shook his head. "There's anuther term my brain don't have. I need yore help, cause I gotta git back to the war. I was shot down. The enemy will run over this whole part of air star bunch if we don't hold em. Yore world may be blowed up in the fight. Yuh kin save yore world if yuh help me."

"Then you were in the starship that crashed in my garden long before this section was settled?" I asked in a stronger voice. I was beginnnig to think again after my initial shock, and I entertained a frightful

suspicion. This monster from the stars was playing with me. Everything he said was a lie. He had murdered Mervyn Phillips.

The giant nodded his head and answered, "That's right. I was wounded, an shot down, an smashed up here. I drained into the ground till my hurts could git well. It ain't took as long as I figgered. All that stuff I et in yore cellar helped—the wood, an the wire, an the coal, an the bugs, an the cans uh garden truck. I feel fit now an fixed up to git back in the fight."

I took two steps toward the star man, keeping my saber down at my side. "How can you go back when your ship was destroyed?" I asked.

"Oh, buildin a ship ain't that much trouble. It'd help if I had more pieces of the oldun. Have you picked up any pieces outside?"

I had reached the couch, and the giant was very close and loathsomely odorous. I said, "I have a box of things that were turned up in the garden, and I have some of your little globes in my room."

"Good. If yuh'll git em fer me, they'll be a big help. It'll be better to wait till night. It might excite folks too much if the ship swelled up in the daytime."

How, I asked myself, could I know that I should help this thing? He might be planning to destroy the Earth. A kaleidoscope containing all the science fiction plots I had read in a lifetime swirled through my aching head. I concentrated on stories of invasions from outer space, but the only novel that would remain in my mind was a classic, *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells. In that story, the creatures from Mars came to Earth to destroy its inhabitants and take the planet for themselves. They even used Earth people for food.

"Yuh see," the star thing said, "I make a little bitty ship usin bits uh the wrecked un, an then I take it out in the yard an blow it up to full size. We'll be ever grateful to yore world if yuh help me, an we'll see the enemy don't wreck it."

I jumped onto the couch. With all the strength of my weak body, I thrust the saber into the monster's left eye. The blade of the old sword sank in for half its length.

The giant shuddered so hard the windows rattled. The saber jerked from my hand. He began to melt. His head flowed down into his shoulders with the saber vanishing in his shapeless body, and his legs became an obscene mass on the floor.

I tottered backward off the couch and almost fell. Quickly the alien

lost his human shape and became the foul conglomeration I had seen in the basement. The mixture of entrails, dung, and random parts of caterpillars and slugs began to dwindle in size as it passed through the floor. I stood panting, sobbing, and gagging until the mess had all gone back into the basement.

Staggering, I left the living room and went into the kitchen. I put a spoonful of instant coffee in a cup, filled the cup with hot tap water, and stirred the liquid. I drank some of the coffee and belched. I wondered why people liked coffee, a foul bitter brew. I was beginning to think that I had made a horrible mistake. I even thought that I had begun the destruction of the planet Earth in some vast interstellar war waged by incredible combatants through long ages for stakes the human mind could not comprehend.

I asked myself if I had killed the star creature. He was still able to change shape after I stabbed him. Would he flow back into the yellow clay walls of the basement to recuperate for a hundred years? If the absorbed brain of Mervyn Phillips had been inside that giant head, had I destroyed the brain?

A growing fear gripped my mind. What if the creature had told the truth? What if the Earth were in danger, and only he could save it? Would he now turn against Earth because of my treacherous attack? "Why did I do it?" I asked aloud. I had acted too hurriedly because of fear and loathing.

Taking a key ring from the top of an antique china closet, I went out into the back yard. The hot sunlight beat on my bare head as I unlocked the tool shed. I pulled down the box of pieces of the starship that I had collected in the garden and carried it back to the house.

Going to my room, I took the tiny globes of far-off planets from the desk drawer and put them in the box. I opened the door in the hall and went down the rough oak steps into the basement, walking slowly and peering around the edge of the box so that I would not fall. I set the box at the entrance to the dark tunnel.

"Starship pilot!" I called. "I've brought the parts of your ship."

I stood listening but could hear nothing except cars passing on the street. I had forgotten to bring the flashlight, and I hesitated to enter the dark tunnel and switch on the overhead bulb. A vision of that ghastly substance flowing out of the clay and engulfing me caused me to step back against the cold air pipe of the furnace.

"I regret that I stuck you with the sword," I said. "I don't know why I did it. I was afraid."

With sudden courage, I plunged stooping into the foul smelling passage, fumbled for the cord, turned on the light, and backed quickly out. There was nothing in the tunnel but yellow clay. I carried the box of starship fragments inside and placed them directly under the light. Leaving the bulb burning, I left the basement.

During the rest of that long hot day, I ate one meal of random sandwiches and milk. I lay on my bed in the afternoon and worried. One of my fears was that the star thing would suddenly boil out of the floor and smother me in revenge for my attack. Another fear was that I should be called Crazy Clark the Man Who Destroyed the Earth.

Under Daylight Saving Time, the evening was much too long. With no lights on, I sat at the kitchen window and looked out at the garden plot that was covered with high grass, tall weeds, and tangles of blooming sweetpeas. This weed patch was a disgrace to the neighborhood, but I was too weak to mow it, and I had been unable to find anyone willing to accept such humble employment.

Nothing had happened since morning, and with all manner of thoughts chasing through my overactive brain, I felt that I would soon be ready for another stay in the mental ward. I even told myself that I had imagined the star pilot, but always there was his alien odor pervading the house to mock me.

About 11:30 o'clock, the garden was dark, but I could see the shape of the blighted apple trees beyond it. Not much illumination from street lights reached this area because of the dense sugar maples in the front yard.

I sat stiffly in my chair, wide awake as if I could never sleep again. I was wondering if I would have to wait a lifetime when a greenish glow became visible among the roots of the weeds. The luminous area spread into a pond. Then it flowed together into a sphere with two arms. The arms held something that I could not distinguish in the night.

A dark area swiftly spread until the sphere was hidden from my view. Something moved up above the apple trees and pointed to the stars. I could not make out the details of this object, but it seemed to be covered with interlocking surrealistic projections.

The house began to vibrate. The windows shook. The dishes rattled. I gripped my chair and planted my feet firmly on the floor.

The starship that I could see only vaguely floated out of my garden. Then the street lights caught it when it was above the shadows. A scintillating construction sparkling and wavering with rainbow colors spurted up toward the Milky Way and vanished.

For the rest of the night, I lay on my bed. I did not sleep. One thought filled my flighty brain. The starship pilot went back to the war, but did he go as a friend or as an enemy?

Businessman's Lament

SCOTT EDELSTEIN

"I'VE HAD all the bad breaks," the old man said. His voice was urgent, but his posture was straight, his eyes clear. He was dressed in an attractive brown suit. His body reeked slightly of cologne. He reached out and took hold of my shirtsleeve. His grip was firm, his hand steady. "I've got nobody in the world."

I was a stranger to the city, had in fact arrived only an hour earlier on a train. "Oh, really?" I said.

He gave me a look that was half pitiful, half angry. "I don't have a damned friend," he told me. "Give me five dollars or I'll kill myself on the street."

I placed my suitcase down on the sidewalk and considered what he had said. "I don't have five dollars cash on me," I said. "And my checkbook's packed away." I tapped my suitcase with my fingertips.

"Five dollars or I kill myself," he repeated frantically. "Do you want my blood on your hands? Do you want my death to follow you the rest of your days? How are you going to face your own grandchildren, knowing that a harmless old man who never hurt anyone died because of your own greedy attachment to your wallet?" He released his grip on my shirt and gestured vaguely.

"Perhaps we can come to some sort of equitable settlement," I said, sitting down carefully on the edge of my suitcase. "Would you settle for, say, a dollar and a quarter? I'm only taking up two minutes of your time. That averages out to thirty-seven fifty an hour. If you compute that into a forty-hour week that's about, well . . ." Damn it, my mathematical ability had deserted me again. I took a blind stab at it. "That's thirteen thousand dollars a week, or about three-quarters of a million a year, before taxes. If you took just one year's salary at that

rate, put it in a savings account, and let it mature for ten years, you'd have amassed enough funds to provide for the retirement of the entire population of Thunder Bay, Ontario."

His face grew grim. "Forget it; you think you can buy my life for a lousy dollar and a quarter? Is that all my life is worth to you?"

"Frankly," I said, sweating in the afternoon sun, "I haven't had a chance to price your existence as yet. Nor am I familiar with the current market value of people of your sex, age, financial bracket, and so forth. But the simple fact of the whole matter is that I don't have five dollars on me. Considering these circumstances, would you accept a dollar twenty-five?"

He glared at me and did not speak. Finally he gave me a curt little nod and a noncommunicative mutter. I handed him two one-dollar bills and requested change, which he did not have.

"Look," he said, handing me the bills back, "how about if you owe me the five and pay me tomorrow? I'll be right here from one till about four-thirty. Just give me a signed I.O.U."

I agreed and wrote out and signed a promise to pay, which I handed to him. I sat down again on my suitcase to watch him. He turned away and caught a teenage girl by the edge of her sweater. "Lady," he said, "you've got to help me." I noticed that his eyes were wet. "I've got nothing left to live for. My wife has deserted me. My kids hate me. I've lost my job. I don't see any point in living any more."

"He's had all the bad breaks," I said, stuffing my money into my jacket pocket.

"Your face is the only good thing I've seen all day. Help me out. Give me five dollars or I'll stab myself right here, in front of your eyes."

She stared at him. "I'll give you a dollar," she said.

"What is this? Suddenly I've been devalued? Youth never has any respect for the old." He stared back at her. "Wouldn't it be nice to know that you saved somebody's life today?"

She opened her purse and took out a thin wallet. "There's a man down the street who's offering the same deal for a dollar a head. If you don't lower your price, the competition's going to force you out of business. Do you want the dollar or not?" She opened the wallet, took out a dollar bill, and held it in front of the old man. "Wait a minute," she said, replacing the dollar, "I'd rather get rid of some of this change."

She opened a change purse and counted out a dollar, mostly in nickles. She held the handful of coins out in front of the old man. He glared at her, then took the money and placed it in his pocket. The teenager closed her purse. "You want some advice?" she said. "Unionize." She walked on.

"Snotty kids," the old man muttered, biting a hangnail. "Whatever happened to the days when the customers were genuinely concerned? You know, the ones who'd get upset when you'd mention death. Have they all moved away, or have the times changed, or what?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you," I said. "I'm just a visitor here. Frankly, I'd expected there would be some sort of price controls to be obeyed. Have you thought about working in a wealthier neighborhood?"

He looked at me. There was a genuine sadness in his eyes. He gave an almost invisible shrug. "It's the same wherever you go. But what can you do? A man's got to make a living. And I'm not so young anymore. I've got to put away something for my retirement. Or for just in case, God forbid, something should happen to me, you know."

I agreed, and stood up. "It doesn't look like there are many alternatives open to you," I advised him. "It's either lower your price or go under. We're in a recession, you know. Perhaps if you had some sort of gimmick. Obviously trading stamps wouldn't be feasible, but perhaps you could offer a going-out-of-business special. Say, for a dollar-fifty, you would offer to not kill yourself twice. Maybe you could form a duet or a trio—three stifled suicides for two dollars." I picked up my suitcase. "You could make big money with a little help from Thanatos, Incorporated," I said. "The suicide field is wide open for bright new talent." I handed him my card. "We're in business management, specializing in independent businessmen like you. I think we can help you."

He spat in the gutter, took my card, and tossed it at my feet. "Buzz off. I don't need your help," he muttered angrily. "Never did and never will. I don't need someone to make my decisions for me. I get along all right without you jokers." He turned away from me and eyed the other pedestrians professionally. I walked on.

When I returned the following afternoon, he had lowered his price to fifty cents. He was in trouble. I stood by and smiled at him until he turned toward me, scowling. But behind the scowl was a look of helplessness. He stepped toward me. They all come over to us sooner or later.

Dark Vintage

JOSEPH F. PUMILIA

IT IS difficult for me to write this—but it is not difficult to remember how it started, how the abomination began . . .

Although I had once known Kires well, I had not seen him since our postgraduate days other than briefly, in business dealings.

I was therefore surprised to receive a call from him inviting me to "a little get-together" at his place. As I drove down the dark highway to his wooded retreat, I thought over all the past times we had had together in college, the women we had known, the dark things we had delved into—I half in jest, he half seriously.

I remembered from a few earlier visits that he had a great library dedicated to magic, the occult, the supernatural. Some of these had been by out-and-out frauds: Crowley, Nostradamus, Blavatsky. Some of them were incunabula and no doubt valuable. Many, however, were crumbling, fire-scarred or worm-eaten. In one case I had recognized the distinct odor of human dung emanating from a particularly disgusting example of the binder's art. And in another case the book was bound in human leather. I remember Kires saying regretfully that all these were nothing beside the *one book* he did not possess, but which he had partly read—

At the time I considered a library devoted to such drivel quite frivolous. Still there was no reason to begrudge the man his hobby. Reflecting on our past encounters, it seemed to me that Kires and I had never really talked—about ourselves, that is. Of his present circumstances I knew only that he was very wealthy, thanks largely to the advice my firm had given him.

If I had known then what I know now, there is no doubt that I would have killed him on the spot and burned his house to the ground. But of course, there was no way to know. And now, it is too late. As I write, the sun stands low in the sky. When I am done with this manuscript I must find a secret place to preserve it, for the long night ahead holds terrors for us all. The change comes slowly, yet I must write quickly.

Kires' home was large and contemporary. The exterior was tasteless, but the interior was superbly decorated with an old world flavor, almost like some richly endowed baronical estate. He had put in dark mahogany paneling, and even stone on some inside walls. Of course the modern appliances spoiled the illusion of timelessness, but I would without doubt have been content to live in such a place.

When I pulled into the driveway, I saw that there were several cars ahead of me. I was met at the door by Kires' beetle-browed butler, still the dark specter I remembered from my last visit. He took my things and showed me into the sitting room, where the other guests were assembled before a crackling fire.

Kires rose from their midst and smiled to greet me. "Come in, Armand!" he said jovially. "And get rid of that broker's grimace. Tonight we rejoice."

I had suddenly become the focus of attention of a score of eyes as Kires passed me around for introductions. Then, sitting me down beside him, Kires said, "I've invited you here tonight to help us celebrate a stroke of good fortune, Armand. You're not a connoisseur, are you? Of wines, I mean. Well, I'm not either, but a very rare one turned up, you see. I've invited Millez to tell us all about it."

"Wine, you say?" I replied, somewhat surprised. "What kind of wine is it?"

"I'm sure I couldn't tell you," Kires told me as he beckoned to Millez, a thin ashen-faced gentleman, dapperly dressed.

Millez spoke: "Speaking of wines, Gregory, allow me to serve our guest." He whisked a crystal beaker from an end table and poured a pale straw-colored liquid. "A dry sauterne to fortify you for my little exposition, Mr. Reed. I shall try to keep my words from approaching the sauterne in dryness."

We all laughed at his little joke, and I sipped gratefully at the drink.

Millez turned slightly, and I saw that the butler had appeared behind him with a draped bottle on a tray. Millez removed the cloth and gently lifted for my inspection a medium-sized brown bottle with an odd looking spout.

"Hand made," he said.

"Notice this feature," put in Kires, touching the spout, which extended a few inches from where the mouth of the bottle should have been. The spout was very narrow, tapering to a sealed tip. It was of one piece with the rest of the bottle.

"Yes, that is strange. What's it for?" I asked.

"Well, you see what they have done here," said Millez. "This is nothing more or less than an air-tight bottle. The bottle was blown with this extrusion instead of a normal mouth. Wine was then put in and the spout sealed by heat. It was necessary that such a thin neck be used if it was to be thus sealed."

"Why would anybody want to do such a thing?"

"Who knows? Apparently they wanted to see if it would preserve the wine longer. This method is otherwise unheard of. This is a unique bottle."

"I see," I replied, nodding. "How old is this wine?"

"I would say, perhaps six centuries."

"What! Six hundred years?"

"How's *that* for old wine, Armand!" chuckled Kires. As he said this, I became aware of the fact that all eyes were on me again. I realized that this staring had been going on all evening, as if these people knew something that I did not, and were waiting to see its effect on me.

When I had recovered from my surprise, I said, "I don't suppose the wine's any good."

"On the contrary. It should be perfect—within reason. The unknown glass blower who bottled this wine could not have known that he was prefiguring the experiment of Pasteur with the sealed and unsealed flasks. This is undoubtedly very good wine, if it was good wine to begin with. Of course, it has long since stopped aging, and it has probably lost its bouquet."

"Where do you suppose we found it?" queried Kires, teasingly. I could only wave off the question in my present state of amazement. Kires then told me the following story.

"Millez found it an old trunk in Dallas. Of all the crazy things, some wild-eyed Texas millionaire had bought a French château and had it transported to Texas stone by stone."

I could not suppress a chuckle, joining in with the others, though perhaps the sauterne had heightened my sense of humor. The story was too preposterous to take with a straight face.

"But the trunk?"

"Well," began Millez, "first they had to disassemble the place, and in doing so they found all sorts of queer things hidden away. Strong-boxes, old manuscripts, toys, skeletons, sheet music from the 20's—all the misplaced minutiae of daily life from hundreds of years ago to the present. They put all these loose things into crates and sent them to America. The nouveau riche Texan never bothered to open them. When he died, the heirs took one look at all that old 'trash' and auctioned it off. I bought the crate in question. This bottle was the only one intact out of several, all similarly constructed. The château in Texas is quite a tourist attraction, I hear."

"But how can you tell the age?"

At this point a short, corpulent gentleman with ruddy, jovial features spoke up authoritatively. "By the composition of the glass itself, Mr. Reed. You see that tiny pit on the bottle's underside? I removed a sample with a hand drill and subjected it to neutron activation analysis. The composition of the glass places it in 15th Century France."

Capitalist that I am, at that point I could only remark, "I'd think that's a valuable item." This was the lamest thing I had said all evening, and I tried as best I could to endure with grace the brief silence that followed the statement.

"Undoubtedly we could sell it for a great deal," said Kires by way of rescue. "But we're not going to. Now, Armand, Christophe is going to give us a little lecture."

"On what?"

"Oh history, legend, and biochemistry. And the occult," said the corpulent gentleman, bowing.

It seemed to me that everyone in the room was, if not exactly giddy, then overly jubilant, pleasantly silly. There were grins everywhere and not a frown or straight face in the lot. That isn't normal in any given group of people, and I was sure then that they all knew something I

didn't know, and were doing their best to make it plain to me in a roundabout way.

"The Assyrians," began Christophe, "were plagued by an evil being called the *ekimmu*. The *ekimmu* was something like a ghost, something like a vampire. Its mischief ranged from haunting houses to murder. The Babylonians knew of a demon called *Lilitu*—Lilith of the Hebrews—who sucked blood from infants and did other disagreeable things which need not be discussed in polite company." Here he nodded deferentially in my direction. "The Greeks had the *lamia*, and India is replete with evil beings of similar impolite habits. In short, the belief in vampires, werewolves, and the like is as old as mankind.

"And yet there are no vampires or werewolves prowling the streets today. Where are they?

"Why," I said, "modern science has dispelled the fear of the supernatural."

"Ah, but no," said Christophe. "One might say that modern *medicine* has played its part, but tell me this: what disease would you say a man has if he foams at the mouth, shuns water, and is uncontrollably violent?"

"Rabies, of course."

"Correct. But have you not heard that the legendary werewolf exhibits these same symptoms? Thus we surmise that belief in lycanthropy originated from the observation of humans suffering from rabies. Now that we can cure rabies, werewolf tales do not proliferate, you see?"

"I'll buy that," I replied.

"But of course you are wrong. The tales go on. Krafft-Ebing records many vicious acts, and of Jack the Harlot-Killer you have heard, and Richard Speck. And perhaps Peter Kurten the vampire, and of Vlad of Wallachia, nicknamed Dracula."

"But those were human beings—" I protested.

"In a way," admitted Christophe with pursed lips and a shrug. "And yet if one had to classify them, one must put them in the category of the demons of old. And it is true they do not fully meet the traditional criteria of the archetypal werewolf, or vampire. But you must admit that they are very close."

I had to say, "Yes. I suppose they are."

"But consider vampires. What sickness has symptoms like vampirism? The thirst for blood, fear of the sun, and so on?"

I shrugged. "I know of no disease which could have given rise to such beliefs."

"Correct. There is no such disease today. But it may have existed once."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You mean these—conditions—were caused by disease? Lycanthropy? Vampirism?"

"Yes. There is an historical correlation between plague epidemics and outbreaks of lycanthropy, vampirism, witchcraft, and the occult in general. It is known that pathogenic organisms sometimes mutate, and some scholars believe that the Black Death of the Fourteenth Century, which came as close to eliminating mankind as anything so far, was originally a mild illness which had been around for centuries. Then one day—who can say what caused it? Solar storms? Lightning effects? Perhaps it was a spontaneous change, which is at the basis of all evolution. But one day this harmless disease—it could have been the common cold—changed from a harmless virus to a deadly killer. It came out of Central Asia like the Grim Reaper himself, dwarfing the plagues of Aurelius and Justinian. Then, after a time, the plague was no more. Perhaps the organism mutated back into a harmless strain. To be sure, plague exists today in several varieties: bubonic, septicemic, pneumonic. We hypothesize a vampiric and lycanthropic strain also. Today, epidemics are prevented, and plague is held in check by modern antibiotics.

"I believe that there was an original lycanthropic strain, which mutated into the deadly but certainly less terrible rabies virus, and lycanthropy is probably a mutation that arises from the rabies virus in time of plague, probably as a result of plague's chemical changes in the body."

"But," I pointed out, "werewolves are supposed to change shape."

Christophe smiled indulgently. "We are not talking about the supernatural per se, although supernatural elements often accompany these manifestations. People inflicted with lycanthropy may have believed themselves transformed into wolves, and legend no doubt ascribed the wolf-shape to these hunched, fleeting forms in darkness. There's nothing

to this physical transformation business. In like manner, I believe, the legend of the vampire's protean powers arose. That's all very unscientific."

"This is all extremely interesting," I said, without conviction. I was still not certain of the direction of our conversation.

Christophe smiled disarmingly and continued. "These diseases, not existing today, were originally transmissible in the normal way—by contagion. But it is possible that the diseases became *hereditary* by the change they wrought in the genetic material. As you know, certain drugs affect the chromosomes. LSD is the best known. It was available to the ancients in ergot mold. Other hallucinogens were used as well. Thus viral diseases and drugs can cause genetic change. Mongolism, which is a chromosomal anomaly, is thought by some to have once been caused by disease, and the descendants of the victims of that disease still carry its stigma, even though the mongoloid *disease* no longer exists."

"I think you should point out," said Kires, "that there could be no natural immunity to such a disease, should it ever recur."

"Well," said Christophe, "there are always some immune persons, but in the main people would be in the same position as the Fijians, who dropped like flies when the first white men brought the measles virus to their islands. The whites had been immune for centuries."

"But," I protested, "why should it recur? You said that these hypothetical diseases don't exist today, if they *ever* did."

There was a sudden silence. Again I thought I saw those strange, knowing smiles.

"Did I say that?" Christophe asked.

"I believe you might have given that impression," said Kires.

"Well then, let me correct my omission. There is not really any hypothesis involved. The things I have said are all true."

Kires turned to me, gripped my arm with unaccustomed fervor and said, "Yes, Armand! Those old books are occasionally quite specific. All these so-called supernatural deviations were clearly caused by some disease. The germ theory was not known to the ancients, but—"

"Yes, yes," broke in Christophe with great excitement. "To an expert such as myself, the old accounts admit of no other explanation. Vampires, werewolves, lamias—all products of disease—"

"Lamias, for example," Kires added. "Lamias, succubi. Christophe says these conditions arose from a disease specific to women. It engendered a powerful sexual craving and induced a terrible blood lust, a sadistic, vampiric impulse. It survives today only in certain forms of nymphomania."

"Well, I can see how fascinating this must be to a biologist such as yourself, but if the diseases no longer exist—"

"They *do* exist," Kires said.

"In fact," added Christophe, "we have cultures in this house."

Time seemed to stand still. My words strangled in my throat. The next thought that entered my mind was blurted out involuntarily: "Where?"

The eyes of those present turned, slowly, one by one, to the old brown bottle sitting before me on the table. I could just barely make out some dark liquid beneath the ancient glass, a vintage that might have been the most valuable wine in the world, but in reality must have been—what? A harmless liquid whose evil had been quenched by time? Or something deadly and horrible beyond all patterns of horror?

Christophe picked up the bottle gingerly and held it to the light. I flinched and seized the arm of the sofa, catching my breath. *What if he should drop it?*

"It was bottled," said Christophe, "during the time of the Black Death. During the height of the plague an order of saintly monks nursed dying pilgrims who came to the château—it had been converted into a monastery—seeking salvation. They found none in *this* world. In time the monks themselves fell victim to the disease. It struck, apparently, just after the great wine casks had been opened for bottling. One of the brothers must have been a glassblower before he joined the order, for he tried a brilliant experiment in preserving wines, and created this unique bottle. But instead of a famed vintage, he put into the bottle the essence of the dark ages." He turned the bottle slowly before his eyes, peering into its depths. "They're all in here, Mr. Reed, all the old nightmares, the old terrors, the bane of our fathers."

Seeing that this last strange sentence called for an explanation, Kires said to me, "You see, Armand, we—all of us—we suffer from those maladies Christophe spoke of. Only it is no longer a disease with us. It

is hereditary. Our ancestors contracted the disease and were changed genetically. We still carry the taint in our seed."

"You mean—you're vampires? And werew—" My voice trailed off in astonishment. Indeed, that was one revelation I had not expected.

"I'm afraid we fibbed to you, Armand. There were two bottles, not one, in the château. We opened the other one and experimented with it."

"You're all mad. None of this can be true."

"It's true," said Millez. "And we wouldn't inflict such tribulation upon mankind without good reason. After all, we're not evil men. We did not choose to be what we are. If there were any other way—"

I shook off Kires' hand and stood up. "What reason could there possibly be?" I asked indignantly. "Who are you to set yourself up to judge mankind?"

"Look around you" said Kires. "What do you read of? Orbiting bombs, ICBMs, wars, rebellions, endless bloodshed."

"Dictators," said another. "Enslaved populations."

"Tyranny enforced with the latest technology," said Christophe with a Gallic gesture of contempt. "And you think *we* are monsters?"

"There's only a matter of time before the big blowup, Armand," said Kires intently. "You know that. There are bombs, there are plagues bottled and waiting to be unleashed. Is that so different from what we plan?"

Christophe thrust forward, a messianic light in his eyes. "There is only one way to save mankind from universal annihilation, and that is to split it into small factions which cannot endanger the whole. We will put mankind back on the Malthusian standard and thus famine and pestilence and localized war will check the unification and 'progress' which led only to the doom we face today."

"There will be a second dark age," Kires said, gesturing broadly. "Technology will die. The occult will rise. We will gather those like us, the demons, the mediums, the telepaths, the witches. We will govern behind the thrones of petty kings. The old forbidden books will live again, and the old gods will be summoned from their exile beyond the veil."

I listened to them, fascinated by the coolness with which they chronicled the coming horrors. They were all quite insane, I was certain.

Still, it could be that some deadly germ still lived in the old bottle, some hardy bacteria lying dormant in spore form, awaiting release like a malevolent genie. But these deluded fools had forgotten one item—so I supposed.

"What about modern medicine?" I countered. "You said that plague has been all but wiped out. In no time at all, whole populations can be immunized. You'll have killed millions for nothing!"

"We did not overlook that point," was Christophe's quick reply. "There will be a lapse of time before an immunizing factor is discovered. Furthermore, we have found by experimentation that our bottled plague mutates so rapidly—a habit it has acquired during its years under glass—that no sooner will an antidote be found than the disease will have changed its form. It will have many forms, all constantly mutating. Mankind will be decimated. The great technology will die as the machines break down and are not repaired. The old devils will be loosed again."

"And into this chaos *we* will step," said Millez. "We will bring order. We will unify the diverse elements and bring into check the evils we have unleashed. We will rule by magic and enforce peace by our control over the bounties of nature."

I tried to picture Millez in a goatskin, hopping about as Minister of Agriculture, but the thought did not at that moment seem laughable.

"Mankind will be born anew, Armand!" Kires said, throwing up his arms jubilantly, like a magus before a heathen altar. The firelight cast a Satanic glow over him. "They are aloof, now, but they will come back if we give them what they ask. What are a few ritual sacrifices against the prospect of utopia? The old ones will return because we will make mankind believe. Then, Armand, there will be no turning back."

I sighed heavily, as if releasing a possessing spirit. I watched them move back from me as if I were somehow—contaminated. The butler appeared with my things. I looked once again at the faces of the strange group. Their eyes met mine wherever I turned.

"Why—why are you telling me this?" I asked Kires.

"Because," he said, "you are one of the few who will understand what is happening. Once we explored together the dark sciences—I know you never really believed the things we learned, but now you will

have no choice. We'll need men like you on our side when the time comes."

"We would rather let the demon strain die out with us, Mr. Reed," Christophe said. "But there is no other way. Not really."

"There must be," I whispered. "Please reconsider. In the name of humanity, I beg you."

They did not answer. I had moved a few inches closer to the table where Christophe had set *the* bottle. I moved toward Kires as if to implore him. I spoke a few words. In mid-sentence I sprang to the side and lunged.

My hand found the bottle's neck. I tripped and fell to the floor. The fireplace blinded me with its heat. I swung my arm toward the fire, my fingers releasing the bottle. It would smash among the flames and the evil would die there—

They caught my hand. Many hands gripped my body. The bottle was snatched from my fingers. I screamed in impotent rage as they held me against the floor. Then they let me up, their prize saved.

The last thing I saw was Kires standing alone, clutching the bottle to his heart. The others stood around him. Their eyes were very sad.

"We'll be waiting for you, Armand," he said with infinite compassion.

I drove home in a daze, and upon arriving swallowed a great deal of whiskey and fell into a fitful sleep of slavered lips, bloody talons and hunted, feral eyes. Now I struggle to write this. The moon will soon rise so I will quickly finish this manuscript and seal it away, before my hands are completely useless.

Then I will wait here among the broken stones, among the shadows, for the night that will never end.

Simaitha

DAVID A. ENGLISH

UNDER the glare of the moon, you could see the beach was deserted. Unless something skulked, like a crocodile, in the pools of shadow that mottled the pale sand. Then two women emerged from a stand of twisted trees and moved through the lunar silence, treading silver webs hung from the moon.

One, tall and compelling, strode purposefully; the other, like a toy on a string, stumbled in her wake. Ineptly clutching an ill-tied bundle, the younger woman, only a girl after all, appeared dull-witted, even stupid. But that may not have been her normal state. The moonglare almost blinded, and certainly dazed, one who walked in it.

The older woman, her name was Simaitha, listened to the whispering of the sea. On innumerable feet it scurried forth across the margin of flat, wet sand; withdrawing, it made a sound like a silken sheet slipping from a bed of lovers.

"On a night like this I met Delphis," Simaitha said. "Did I tell you how that was, Thestylis? How I saw him wandering here, bemused by moonlight. He sighed as a man will sigh over lost love. Then I desired him and made him mine. Did I tell you, Thestylis?"

She turned to the girl. Her eyes were like those black pools no moonlight may penetrate, where something might skulk; eyes scoured by negation. For vacant weeks she had gazed on an absence. And hunger for what was absent had famished her heart and scooped hollows for her terrible eyes to skulk in, and made cups for shadows of her cheeks.

Thestylis said nothing. The sea-breeze was not cold at all, not yet;

but the flesh of her bare arms was grainy and rough like the sand. Fright numbed her mouth and tongue. In her misery she could not have spoken even if an easy answer had been required.

"What are you afraid of, dear?" her mistress demanded. "The night? The sea? I found my Delphis on a night like this—right here. . . ."

"Other things can be met by moonlight," the girl said at last.

Simaitha laughed harshly. "What? Witches like myself? Are you afraid of me?"

"No. . . ."

"Of what I might conjure up, then? But it is only Delphis I would conjure up."

"He was a strange, sad man. He did frighten me a little, but . . ."

Simaitha halted and turned to gaze sharply at her maid. Something in the creature's moony stare irritated her.

"But?" she asked maliciously. "But what?"

"Nothing. Only I was sorry for him. Nights when he could not find sleep I heard him walking in the garden and moaning to himself. Sometimes he would sob aloud. Or from my window I would see him wandering on the beach, so forlorn."

"And you pitied him? And thought *you* might do what I could not—console him for what loss he had suffered?"

Thestylis stood mute.

Simaitha tried to read her expression, but there was none, only numbness. Empty and confused by moonlight, the girl's face, like her body, huddled in upon itself. She could summon no response to her mistress' nagging. She began to shiver.

Simaitha turned away. "No; you did not presume. . . ."

The moon had attained a certain height. Midnight stood near. Under the moon a carpet of light, strangely decayed, stretched to the beach and seemed to await an approaching footstep.

"This place is right," Simaitha said. "Here I feel strong. Now make the fire."

The softness of her mistress' voice startled the girl out of her stupor. She acted. While she went about her task, Simaitha continued to talk.

"No, I make you too much a woman. You're only a snip. And what draws you to a man is trifles—a strong member, clever hands, a quick way with words. And you suppose my longing is as yours, a warmth

and melting in the belly, like eyes that ache to weep. Not so. My lust is something edged and cold, a blade of ice.

"Perhaps it is an idea rather than a feeling that moves me tonight. Perhaps it is power over the man that I desire, for his love as such interests me but little. That he loved another—that is what drew me to him in the first place; the challenge of putting him through such changes. And now that he has slipped from my hand and gone to seek her once more, the challenge is renewed."

Turning abruptly from her long, musing gaze at the moon, she cried, "Do not laugh, Thestylis!" Thestylis did not laugh. "He has escaped me, yes—but only for a little while. I only played before, my thoughts elsewhere, absentmindedly as it were. But now I shall become serious. Oh, I shall weave such a spell tonight, that were he on the bottom of the sea or under a mountain—

"Here! Do it this way!"

Impatiently, she pushed Thestylis aside and rebuilt the fire to her better satisfaction. Then she stood back again and let the girl huff and puff the blaze to full brightness. Around them, the night grew suddenly colder. The moon . . .

Simaitha drew a deep, shuddering breath. "We will begin."

Thestylis opened her bundle. Here were loathsome things, the ingredients of a strange and terrible recipe. Cypress hacked from a tomb, feathers of a screech owl, bones snatched from a hungry bitch . . .

While her mistress, voice raised only a little above the tone of normal speech, poured out her invocation to the thousand-faced moon, Thestylis, one piece at a time, fed these articles to the fire.

Sometimes the flames grew lively and took on a garish hue; sometimes they smothered under a smoky pall. Shaking, often dropping items from numb fingers, Thestylis kept doggedly at her task.

Simaitha paused. The air grew still around. Hastily, Thestylis added the remaining items to the flames. Then she too froze still.

And suddenly the world went strange and flimsy for her. One may, by manipulating the set of his mind, change the aspect of the world for himself; that is not so hard. Thus Simaitha had set herself in a magical frame of mind. But the world changed for Thestylis, too.

Objects, slants of light, became arbitrary. Beach, sea and moon; these no longer persisted necessarily in their identities. They might have

been, even if they were not, something other. Certain emotional states normally elicited by objects no longer came forth; other states replaced them. The moon, for example, now moved Thestylis like the sight of an animal vomiting.

Forewarned for her own good, she knew what her mistress next would do. A word would be said, one that Thestylis did not wish to hear, not ever, neither in life nor after it, neither waking nor in dreams. She did not want to know that name. If she knew it, it might come to her lips unbidden or be uttered in sleep. If she knew that name she would never be able to think of anything but preventing herself from saying it—a lifelong struggle which ultimately she would lose.

She pressed her hands to her ears and shook her head as if in pain. She babbled nonsense to shut out the sound. A moment later the terrible oppression of the air abated; the utterance had ended.

"—Gorgo, Mormo, thousand-faced moon, look favorably upon our sacrifices!" Simaitha finished.

"Quickly now! You know what to do."

Struggling to ignore the god-charged atmosphere of the night, Thestylis poured meal on the fire. "These are the bones of Delphis," she whispered. She brought a green laurel bough close to the fire. "Thus let his bones burn for my mistress."

The moon seemed to hang closer. It swelled and shrank like a moon seen through tears, like an image in moving water. Simaitha, muttering like one in a delirium, gazed away into the night as if addressing powers crowding close. She cajoled and threatened. Sometimes Thestylis caught the drift of her address and shuddered. Could a mortal know such things and go unblasted?

She sensed something terribly wrong with her mistress, something obscene about her. It was madness, which it is not decent to witness. Something dreadful—

"Fool! Get on with it! The bran—the spurge—"

The bran spilled from her shaking fingers as she carried it to the fire. Carefully she lay the spurge in place, saying, "This is spurge, which sets mares in heat."

Quickly, for when this was done she could depart, Thestylis took Delphis' cloak and stripped away the hem. She tore it into pieces and

added them to the fire, the fire dying under heapings of magical substances.

The stinging smoke made her cough, made her eyes water.

The moon swung lower.

Witches call the moon from the sky. They would go as far as that in their spells. And here it comes, that leprous face—

How she came to be flat on her back in the sand, she did not know. Simaitha slapped her face repeatedly, and she whimpered and tried to crawl away. She felt sick and dizzy.

But the moon, at least, was in its place again.

Simaitha put a carved box in her hands. "Take this back to the house and smear the door of Delphis' room with the ointment therein. Spit three times and cry, 'I annoint the bones of Delphis.' Then you may go to bed."

Alone at last, glad, she thought, to be alone, Simaitha waited. She felt hot and cold alternately. The fire, almost dead, gave no heat, but she did not build it up again. She waited.

Sweat beaded her brow, glittering like the silver dust dancers sprinkle on their bodies. She shivered, then burned.

Am I ill? Now? Has the night air brought on some fever or ague? Or is it the strain of the conjuring?

It's neither. I'm sick with love. Delphis did that to me, not caring whether he did or not, and then departed. But if he had cared, he could never have done it—never!

Her face was strangely distorted by an unreadable expression. Her eyes flashed two contrary messages, and there was no way to resolve the ambiguity.

She thought of a poem. Oh, these poets! *He desired to have had her love*. At first you thought, what an odd thing to say. But the poem said exactly what it meant. To have had a person's love—and so be done with it! As presently I shall be done with Delphis.

She became aware of a small movement far off down the beach. She did not turn to it; she knew it was Delphis. And already her love was dying. Call it love. All that remained was to set the seal on her triumph over him, and then—no more Delphis. She would be free.

Simaitha waited. The dark figure far down the beach had passed

from her field of vision, but she had no need of turning to follow his progress. The place in which she sat gave her a feeling of strength and confidence. Any surrender to apprehension would have taken away confidence. In some way, if she had needed to look and see if it was Delphis, it might not have been he. Instinct, which, in this place, she trusted, told her that.

Soon, behind her, she heard the approach of scraping footsteps. A whispering in the sand, and something reluctant about them. The moon went dark and she shivered, and it was as if, with the darkening of the moon, her consciousness was abrogated. Then the cloud passed, the moon returned; at her back was a presence.

"Delphis," she stated.

Had she doubted, even a little, it would not have been Delphis. It would have been someone or something else.

"Why did you call me?" he pleaded and demanded, both. "My sorrow had ended, and all my grief. I had found the rest you could not give me."

His voice was terribly weary.

Simaitha only laughed. "I never sought to give you rest, Delphis. Only to be, myself, the cause of your unrest, instead of another."

"Why couldn't you let me be?"

"For the reason I have stated. And what did you think, this night, as you lay in her arms, and all your resting and your ease was set at naught and you could not help but come to me?"

"Why, I was amazed, Simaitha, and I wondered greatly. And so would you, if you knew in what arms I lay—"

"No! Do not turn to look at me yet. Wait until you have heard me, and then you will not wish to, and then you will have to. That is fair, don't you think? For you have none to blame but yourself."

"I don't understand you."

"You never did. You thought you knew so much, witch. And you knew so little. You think because you have great powers you understand so much, but you really understand very little—nothing!"

"Delphis—"

"You thought, when my thoughts were elsewhere, that I dreamed of another woman. You thought when I wept it was for unrequited

love. You thought what ensnared me was simple lust, that movement in a dream towards a spasm, which you could match."

"And what was it after all that made you weep?"

"Life, Simaitha. Everything. How can I explain? Only, there was nothing in this world that did not strike at my very being, oppress me with its terrible weight. Oh, it was a bottomless grief and weariness that sank to my bones, a deep pain that had its roots not in *how* things were but in the fact *that* they were."

"Madness," she said. "Madness. The sickness called melancholia, whose sufferers weep out their days and seek to end their lives—"

"Madness, melancholia." He laughed most bitterly. "You can name the ill, can you minister to it? I knew the cure, in any case."

"You wanted to take your life?"

"Wanted to? At last I did!"

She thought how terrible this was. Not as she had imagined it would be at all. She was gaining no satisfaction from it, none, this dreadful dialogue in the darkness; two terrible strangers who did not even face each other—

"Where did you think I was?" he demanded. "That night, after I left you, I walked into the sea. Then I swam, fixing my eye on a distant star low down on the horizon. And at last my strength failed me and I sank—I sank—beneath the waves. . . ."

Now he spoke as a man in love, softly yearning and all unworthy. These were such tones as she had expected to hear from him. And everything was wrong—wrong!

"It was no woman I longed for, Simaitha—unless death is a woman. But even I do not know, so deep was the peace you have wantonly broken."

"Gods—gods—why do you tell me—tell me this?" she muttered brokenly.

"Now you may turn. Now you may reap the reward of your labors."

"No, go hence! You can't—"

"How can I depart until I have done what I must? Was the spell you laid on me so weak that a few words can turn it aside?"

And she knew it was true. And she knew what must happen, wreckage of a woman crying in the dark. Bend the gods, those powers, to

our vain purposes? They let us think so, but it is they, always they, who bend us. And the end they work for is laughter—laughter as cold and killing as the moon watching this latest and rarest of jokes.

Simaitha turned. The moon, uncalled, leaned closer. Cold light on white, gibbous flesh. Fish had eaten his face. His cold arms went round her.

Broken of heart, she moaned, "Well, this will not satisfy my love, but it will end it."

In the Land of Angra Mainyu

STEPHEN GOLDIN

IT WAS in Tehran that the simurgh came into the Shop. I had not seen him for quite a long time, but he still looked as magnificent as ever. His golden feathers sleeked majestically down his body, the two powerful wings folded neatly at his sides. His beak curved sharply, and his eyes were darting and alert. I started to greet him as one would an old friend, but something in his demeanor warned me that he had come to the Shop on business rather than pleasure, so I resorted to my standard welcoming line.

"May I help you?" I asked.

Saena did not waste his time with words. "Zohak is loose."

That was a startling pronouncement. "But the Time has not yet come . . ." I started to protest.

"That, at the moment, is incidental. He is loose."

"How did it happen?" My professionalism overcame my surprise, and my mind became analytical almost at once.

If the simurgh had had shoulders, he would have shrugged them then. Instead, he turned his head quickly from side to side in his gesture of uncertainty. "It has been a long time since he was chained. Many things could have happened. Spells lose their powers, water eats through chains, insects nibble at bonds. Who can say how he escaped? But he is out and must be recaptured before he can work his harm on the world."

"How long since he escaped?"

"Three days."

"Three days! Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

The simurgh hesitated here. The question clearly embarrassed him. "I thought I had taken care of the matter by myself. As you know, I sometimes involve myself in the affairs of men, particularly heroes. There was one man in a small mountain tribe that I had been watching for years, in whom I thought I saw the potentials of heroism. When I first heard of Zohak's escape, I instructed this man to recapture him. He went off to Mount Demavand in a properly aggressive spirit, and I thought that would be that.

"But I hadn't reckoned on Zohak's being able to get in touch with his old allies so quickly. A Druj in the guise of a beautiful woman sidetracked my man, and is now holding him under a spell in the land of Angra Mainyu." The simurgh sighed. "Heroes just don't seem to have the power of self-denial nowadays."

"No," I said abstractedly, meanwhile planning strategy. "I suppose the first order of business will be to free your man so that he may help me in the fight. For I've no doubt that Zohak will not be fighting alone by the time we reach him."

"Probably not," Saena agreed. And when I was silent for some time, he continued, "I suppose you will require the usual payment."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I didn't make the rules," I said apologetically.

"I know."

I scanned the walls of the Shop, searching the shelves for something that might aid me in my upcoming job. A vial of *haoma* juice was one of the first things I spied; that usually came in handy. My iron staff, yes, definitely. A special type of thread for binding Zohak once we'd recaptured him. And the Cloak of Lies would serve a double purpose. It would keep me warm in the frigid land of Angra Mainyu—but warmth was the least of its advantages.

I fingered the Angel in Black that hung about my neck. The pendant was given to me in payment long ago by a grateful sculptor. My fingers stroked the flowing gauzy robes and the upheld trumpet of the figure, and I felt the usual soothing effect. I was ready.

"Let's go," I said.

Mount Demavand is less than a hundred kilometers northeast of Tehran. I gathered up all my paraphernalia and climbed on the

simurgh's back. We went out the back door of the Shop (oh yes, it does have a back door, though few have ever seen it) and he took off. His powerful wings now showed their true strength, for he carried even my weight without a trace of effort. On we flew at great speed, for there was no time to waste. We quickly left the city behind us and were flying over open country. At first, the land below was relatively flat, but it quickly became more hilly and rolling as we approached the Mazanderan Mountains. Mount Demavand was soon towering before us, an imposing rocky giant reaching defiantly for the sky. But up was not the direction that concerned me, for I would not have to scale this peak. Rather, my search would take me down to the subterranean depths beneath the mountain, into the land of Angra Mainyu.

The simurgh landed beside the mouth of the secret cave whose existence is known only to a few. Inside, I would find the path that would take me where I had to go. As I alit from his back, I asked, "Will you be coming with me?"

"I think not. My home is in the skies, not beneath the earth. I may be needed more above ground than below it."

I nodded at Saena's words. I had not really expected him to accompany me, and I am quite used to traveling alone. It would have been nice to have had his company along with me on the difficult journey ahead, but I would manage without him.

The simurgh flew off as I entered the cave. Even just a few steps inside, the interior was the blackest of darks. The darkness was a thick, clammy sponge that greedily soaked up every ray of light that penetrated that far. Fortunately, I would not have to make my journey under such terrible conditions.

I put the thread and the vial of *haoma* juice in the interior of the Cloak of Lies, and fastened the cloak tightly around me. I gripped the iron staff firmly in my hand. Then I lay down on the hard ground and relaxed all my muscles, preparatory to leaving my body. I breathed deeply at first, then more shallowly as my body required less oxygen. I could feel my pulse slowing, and the Angel in Black on my chest began to glow faintly. Then, with the familiar-but-awesome wrenching of mind and spirit, I broke free of my earthy form and entered into the forboding area of the second sphere. And, as always, there was the familiar disorientation that accompanies the intersphere transition. So I stood up to take stock of the situation.

Normally, the first thing about the second sphere that hits me is the bright white light that pervades the atmosphere. It was still present here in the cave, but the awful darkness of the cavern managed to affect even that—the light was dimmed to such an extent that I scarcely had to blink. But there was still enough to see by. I could make out the dim shadow on the ground that was my body's projection into the second sphere, hazy and unsubstantial. Stalactites glistened overhead and dripped little drops of water on the cold stone floor. A sudden breeze blew through the cave, and I pulled the Cloak of Lies about me for warmth. A little further into the cave, the downward path began.

I started out. At first, the path was easy to travel, being broad and smooth and moving downward at a modest incline. But it very shortly grew more difficult. There was dust on the ground, looking as though it had been lying there undisturbed for centuries. I began to find small fragments of rock in the path, then larger ones. The road started narrowing as the walls of the cave squeezed together in an almost wilful attempt to crush the hapless wayfarer. The ceiling got lower, and I was forced to stoop as I walked.

Without warning, the tunnel ended and the path became a ledge. To my right, an enormous circular shaft twenty meters in diameter plummeted down into the depths of the earth, seemingly bottomless. A chilly breeze blew up from the shaft, and I pulled the cloak a little tighter around me. On my left was the wall of rock. The path continued, spiraling down around the shaft keeping the mountain always on the left.

I continued on. The path became more and more difficult to negotiate. Large boulders were now in the way, which had to be squeezed around or else climbed over entirely. In places, the path was a mere fifteen centimeters wide and threatened to crumble beneath my feet. Of necessity, I went slowly. Occasionally, I would come to gaps that had to be leapt, but since the distance was less than a meter each time it presented no serious obstacle.

Around, around, down and down and down. I descended for eight millennia, or perhaps it was only seven seconds; time has no frame of reference in the second sphere. As I descended, the air grew colder, a frigid, biting cold that tweaked one's digits in a cruelly playful manner. The wind grew stronger and whistled past my ears, at times so loudly that it drowned out the omnipresent echo of my footsteps.

At last, I came to the bottom. One wall contained a niche. I went over to examine it. Inside lay the shackles that had, until recently, bound the demon Zohak. I bent down and studied them carefully. It was difficult to tell why they had failed, whether through natural erosion or just shoddy craftsmanship in their manufacture. But I could not blame the artisans very much; the bonds had held for several thousand years against the strainings of a strong and furious demon. Probably the spells initially placed on them were not the strongest and had eventually given out.

At the opposite wall was a tunnel. I went through it. It was level and went only for a few dozen meters, then suddenly opened up into an immense cavern, so huge that I could not see the top. A chill breeze was my only welcome to this silent world of despair and desolation. Three hundred meters away, I could see a tent that I suspected of being the abode of the Druj who had enchanted the simurgh's hero.

I had reached the land of Angra Mainyu.

I approached the tent. It was of moderate size, and could easily have accommodated a small group of people. The material bespoke its unnatural origin. It was made of a shimmering cloth of rainbow hue that, whenever one thought of it as being one color, instantly became another, thus displaying an everchanging appearance. It stood out as a thing of incredible beauty in this place of total decrepitude. I had to keep my eyes off it forcibly as I approached, for the tent had been made hypnotic for a purpose.

I stopped about three meters from the tent and called out a greeting. "Ho! Who is it dwelling here?"

After a moment, a man's voice answered, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am but a poor wayfarer suffering under the curse of a Yatu. The evil sorcerer bade me wander this land of death until cats fly and fish walk. I ask only a moment's respite within the shade of your marvelous tent and whatever hospitality you may choose to offer me."

There was a pause, and I could hear voices conversing in low tones. Then the flap of the tent opened. "Enter, traveler, and enjoy what rest you can before your doom takes you away again." I pulled the Cloak of Lies tightly around me and went in.

Inside, the tent was sensuously lavish. Gauzy veils were draped every-

where, brushing the skin with a light, seductive touch. The ground abounded with satin cushions so that it was impossible to plant one's feet on bare earth. Incense burned from small braziers scattered about, giving the atmosphere a heady and soporific aroma.

Through the veils, I could see a male figure propped up on one elbow looking at me. I knew instantly that this must be the simurgh's hero. He was cast in the heroic mold as surely as ever a hero was. Broad, muscular shoulders, dark features, tall body—the form has been described so often before that I hesitate to do it again. And beside him was a woman of incredible loveliness, magnificently proportioned, her skin smooth and white as fresh cream, her hair long and vibrant, and black as a desert night.

They were both looking at me, but I was not worried. The Cloak of Lies was all the concealment I needed. They would see in me exactly what I suggested to their minds, be it dwarf or giant or troll or man. Such is the power of that cloak; it is one of my most highly valued assets in the entire Shop.

"Come in, stranger," the hero repeated. "How long have you been wandering?"

"How long do the stars shine? I have forgotten time, Sir. I know only walking and desolation and despair."

"And you have been alone all this time?"

"Indeed, without so much as the sight of another creature for eons until I spotted your magnificent tent standing like a beacon in this wilderness. Tell me, Sir, to whom do I owe thanks for this hospitality?"

A puzzled look clouded the man's face. Just as Saena had suspected, he was under enchantment here. The past and future were alike unknown to him, and he dwelt here in an everlasting present. He turned to the Druj for help, but she just pressed her hand gently to his lips and the troublesome question vanished from his mind. When he turned back to me, his expression was again serene. "No thanks are necessary," he explained.

I moved a step nearer. "If I may be so bold, Sir, I would like to ask another favor of you."

"What is it?"

"I am an old man, and I have been wandering long and lonely without sight of a woman for ages. May I look directly upon the face of your wife for just a moment?"

I was playing with fire here, and I knew it. Throughout most of the Middle East, what I had just asked would be a severe affront. But the Druj was not legally the man's wife, nor was she in any way inferior to him, so his possessiveness would probably not extend to her. Also, the Cloak of Lies would still be helping me. Both of them would be seeing me only as a weary, dessicated old man, incapable of doing any harm.

"You become rude, old man," the hero chided me.

"The solitude has driven social amenities out of my head," I replied. "But I am old and tired. I mean no harm."

"Very well." He parted the gauzy veil, and I could look directly upon them.

I took a few steps nearer, as though to get a better view. Then, as quickly as I could, I threw off the cloak and sprang at the Druj. I bent my left arm tightly around her throat and stepped behind her, choking her as I did so. I grabbed the Angel in Black from around my own neck and slipped its chain over her head.

The transformation was sudden and startling. Where there before had been a beautiful woman was now a hateful, spitting monster. It was six feet tall, covered all over with coarse, greasy hair. Its eyes had no pupils, its nose was flat and pressed tightly against its face. Fangs protruded from its upper jaw over its lower lip. Its expression was of unadulterated hate.

When I had leapt, the hero, his reflexes as good as a hero's should be, moved toward me to stop what looked like an insane act. But as soon as the Druj had been revealed in its true form, he froze, unbelieving. He stood paralyzed for several seconds, unwilling to accept that the hideous creature I now held had been his love of just a few moments before.

The Druj, meanwhile, was struggling with all the strength of a liar who has been found out. The greasy hair of its body made holding onto it difficult. "Help me!" I commanded the hero. "It mustn't be allowed to escape."

My words roused him to action. He picked up his sword, which had lain neglected in a corner, and with one slice cut off the Druj's head. The body convulsed in my arms, and the Druj's thick, yellow blood spurted from its neck. I flung the lifeless body away from me in disgust and redonned my pendant.

"That," I said, "was a Druj, one of the worst creatures of deceit that the second sphere has ever spawned. The simurgh sent me to rescue you from it and to help you recapture Zohak. The Druj knew it could never overpower you, so it delayed you in other ways. At some later time, it might have killed you through treachery."

"Thank you," he said meekly. He was feeling very embarrassed about how he, a specially chosen hero, could fall victim to such a hideous creature.

"Just try, in the future, to be a little more careful whom you dally with," I grumbled. Then both of us had to scramble suddenly towards the exit as the magical tent began to collapse. The spell that had created it died very shortly after its maker. I quickly grabbed my cloak and staff as I left. We stood outside and watched the tent shrivel up into a small packet on the ground, then melt into a puddle of gooey white liquid that soaked itself into the earth.

At last, I broke us out of our contemplative trance. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Let's go."

Together, we trudged off through the land of Angra Mainyu in search of Zohak.

Around us stretched wasteland, bleak and lonely. Angra Mainyu, lord of darkness and falsehood, had created this world in antithesis to the world of life. All here was death, silent and grim. The air had the chill of a morgue. Winter in this land was ten months long, months so cold that the ground was perpetually frozen over. Even in the summer, the biting cold seeped out of the earth to infect the world of Angra Mainyu with its evil iciness. The land was generally flat. A few hardy plants struggled to survive amid the desolation, but they were scrawny excuses for life. The ground actually creaked as I walked over it. The smell of rust infiltrated my nostrils.

We walked in silence; the desolation of the landscape had a dampening effect on our emotions. Zohak's trail was straight and easy to follow. I guessed where he would be heading: Sinvat, the bridge between the land of the living and that of the dead. When the trail confirmed my suspicions beyond any doubt, I said, "We will never be able to overtake Zohak by following the trail he has made, for he can move as quickly as we can. But I know where he is heading, and I know a shorter way of getting there."

"Let's take it, then."

"It is a very dangerous route," I warned. "It takes us right through the cave habituated by all the great Daevas. If they should spot us, we would stand little chance against their collective onslaught."

"I am not afraid of physical combat," my companion said. "Trickery and deceit may claim me prisoner, but never will I surrender or shrink from a contest of strengths."

We turned from the path, and I led us along a way that would hopefully allow us to gain some time on our quarry. The prospect of danger seemed to lift my companion's spirits, for he was now in quite a talkative mood. He told me about his tribe, and about life in the mountains, about his women and about his prowess with a sword. I listened politely, not really caring; I had heard too much of the same type story before for it really to interest me.

Finally, he asked me, "Who is Zohak?"

That stopped me. "Don't you know?"

"No. The simurgh was in a hurry. All he told me is that Zohak is a demon king with snakes growing from his shoulders who must be prevented from returning to the realm of men before he can cause trouble. Then he whisked me off here, where I followed after Zohak until I met the Druj."

I sighed as I began walking again, reminding myself that my companion was from a small mountain tribe and could not be expected to know everything. "Zohak," I explained, "was once a mortal and a king back in the Days of the Heroes. But he had weaknesses, and Angra Mainyu himself preyed upon them. Disguising himself as a chef, Angra Mainyu worked his way into the king's favor by preparing meals of such exquisite dishes that Zohak was soon at his bidding. When he asked his chef if there were any favor that he, the king, could bestow, Angra Mainyu replied that he only wished to be able to kiss the shoulders of the king. Immediately upon doing so, two large snakes grew from the spots of the kisses, and Angra Mainyu departed. Zohak soon learned that, in order to stay alive, he would have to feed each serpent daily with the brains of a man.

"Zohak ruled for a thousand years, growing more and more hated by his people, who had to make daily sacrifices so that this monster could live. Finally, the hero Feridun overthrew him, and would have killed him if he had been allowed. Instead, he was bidden to chain Zohak

beneath Mount Demavand where the demon would stay until the Final War. Unfortunately, Zohak has managed to escape a little earlier than anticipated, so it is our duty to put him back where he belongs. The world has troubles enough without having to cope with a monster like Zohak."

And now we came to the foot of the hills we had to climb. Talking ceased, since our energies were better directed in helping us scale the almost sheer wall of stone ahead. Here there was no neatly laid-out trail. Every step had to be earned, every foothold tested. The rocks were sharp and cold. I began to wish I'd brought some mountaineering equipment, but I couldn't think about it for too long. I am a realist, and all the wishing I cared to do would not help me find my next handhold. I concentrated on climbing.

Slowly, tortuously, we inched our way up the side of the cliffs. My fingers were bleeding from a million little cuts and scratches, and my companion's were no better. We rested every thirty or so meters, taking in huge lungfuls of air and giving our sorely overused muscles a brief chance to relax. For once, the coldness of the land of Angra Mainyu was useful—it helped invigorate us. When our all-too-brief rests were up, we could move again, refreshed if not rested.

We came at length to the opening of a cave: the cave of the dreaded Daevas, any one of whom would be a powerful match for our combined talents. The route I had chosen called for us to move along one wall through the cave to a small passageway on the other side. We would have to do this without allowing the Daevas to become aware of our presence.

I indicated to my comrade that utter silence was essential, and he nodded comprehension. We moved almost as one body, hugging the cave wall tightly and clinging to shadows that could hide us. Our pace was slow, for we had to watch the scene that was taking place inside the cave for any sign that our presence had been detected.

Throughout the center of the cave sprouted tongues of cold flame. Its glow was pale and ghostly, and had the opposite effect from normal fire—it fed on heat, drawing it out of any and all who got too near, until all but the strongest around it were frozen. Around this fire congregated the Daevas themselves—proud Naonhaithya, a sneer perpetually embossed on his rebellious features; decadent Taurvi and

Zairisha, sharing mutual delight in their degradations and perversions; wild Sauru, powerful and firm-willed; fierce Aeshma, ever angry, ever dangerous; and leading the group was the "Spirit of Evil," Ako-Mano, responsible to none but Angra Mainyu himself. An impressive lot of power gathered together in one space for unclean purposes. It impressed even me, and I have seen a good deal among the spheres. My companion was awestruck by the assemblage, but he found the courage to keep moving. I cannot fault him that.

We were maybe two-thirds of the way across the cave when my foot accidentally kicked a pebble and sent it clattering noisily along the ground. Instantly, both of us froze, and I whipped the Cloak of Lies around the two of us. It was barely big enough, not being made for two people.

It was the fiery-tempered Aeshma who turned around to look at what might have caused the sound. He peered intently for a long time—or at least it seemed so subjectively. The Cloak of Lies worked its spell to blend us invisibly into the wall. The cold light from the deathflames flickered about us. And at last, Aeshma turned back to the business in which he had been engaged before—torturing souls, most likely, though I never did get a clear view of it.

We still waited, not daring to move, lest one of the other Daevas look our way. But it soon became clear that the sound I had made had not attracted much attention, though it had sounded loud to us, and again started edging across the cavern. We reached the other side without further incident, and breathed considerably easier.

From here on, the path was well-marked and not too difficult to traverse. It led steadily upward, of course, but it was all smoothed out, and there was no need to search for footholds. We ran, now, trying to make up for lost time in our pursuit of Zohak. As we moved further from the land of Angra Mainyu, the temperature began rising again, taking some of the chill out of us. The wind began to increase, blowing at our backs and pushing us along. Up, up, up, a direction that began to seem endless. But our legs were moving and we dared not stop, for fear that we might not be able to start again.

We reached the top and found ourselves moving on level ground once more. It was such a welcome change that we actually started

running faster despite our weariness. And, without any warning, we turned a corner and there before us lay our objective.

Sinvat, the bridge that spanned the gulf between the worlds of the living and the dead. Made of solid rock, arching the fifteen meter distance between two mountains. Below it was an abyss so deep it defied imagination. The bottom was invisible, but it reached down at least to the land of Angra Mainyu, if not further. Clouds obscured our vision, and only the wind played and moaned through that pass. There was a mist that covered the area, making the ground slightly slippery underfoot and reducing visibility sharply.

But through the mist, we could still see the snake-shouldered figure that could only be Zohak. We had arrived in time to meet him, and, hopefully, stop him here. Immediately upon seeing our quarry, my companion rushed forward yelling his battle cry. I followed behind a bit more carefully, knowing that Zohak was not the only danger we faced on Sinvat.

At the sound of the hero's yell, Zohak looked up. His face was hatred twisted by surprise. Thick brows arched over angry eyes, and a thin, straight nose overhung lips that were cruel and bloodless. His arms were powerfully muscled, and from his shoulders sprang the snakes, each at least a dozen centimeters in diameter. Their tongues tasted the air with quick flicks, and their pinpoint eyes watched the oncoming charge with cold passion.

Then, from the right side, came the danger I had been expecting—Indra, the Daeva who guards Sinvat, ready to hurl unsuspecting or weak souls into the hellish abyss below. He was nearly two and a half meters tall and in superb condition, muscles bulging on his arms and legs. He loomed above the scene, calmly surveying the situation before deciding what action to take.

I took off the Cloak of Lies and tossed it on the ground beside me. The time for subterfuge had passed, and I did not want it to get damaged in the fighting that would soon be taking place. The only weapon I had was my iron staff, which was not entirely appropriate—I had taken it to fight Zohak, not Indra. But I would have to make the best of it. Gripping the staff firmly in both hands, I charged at the Daeva of Sinvat.

I was lucky enough to catch him partially unawares, for he had been

devoting most of his attention to Zohak and my comrade and didn't see me until I was almost upon him. I rammed one end of the staff into his stomach, then swung around and caught him below the kneecap. He howled with pain, but he was not severely crippled and was still very dangerous. My only chance to best him would be to press my initial advantage, move quickly, and stay in close. The staff is an in-fighter's weapon, and Indra could out-reach me if moved too far away.

I stayed around his feet, moving between and around his legs. I got in one good blow to the groin that would have sent a man to his knees, but *Daevas* are built along slightly different lines and he was not so desperately hurt. My blows were mostly to minor points of his body in an effort to wear him down more than destroy him. I dared not aim a blow at his head—his reflexes were too quick, and he might be able to grab the staff from me if I were to extend myself that much. So I played hit and run and mentally prepared myself for a long, exhausting duel.

My foot slipped on the mist-soaked rock. As I automatically reached out to balance myself, the rod went sailing from my hands and landed on the bridge about three meters away. I hit the ground with a jarring force, too stunned to move. Indra came toward me, seeing his chance at last to rid himself of this pest.

But suddenly all the action on the bridge stopped, as a loud screeching filled the air. Looking up, I saw a beautiful and awesome sight. Down plummeted Saena the simurgh, talons extended and ready for battle. With him, also, were the other great birds—*Verethragna*, the jet-black raven; *Camrosh*, the gatherer; and *Karshiptar*, who once preached within the enclosure of *Yima*. All of them were in fighting posture, all had murder in their eyes.

Saena led the squadron. Just before they reached the bridge, they split into two groups—*Camrosh* and *Karshiptar* headed for Zohak, while *Verethragna* and the simurgh tackled Indra. The raven dug his claws deep into the *Daeva's* back and raked a bloody trail across his flesh. Saena went straight for the eyes. Indra raised his arms to protect his face. As soon as this happened, *Verethragna* gouged his beak into Indra's neck. While the *Daeva* was thus occupied. I recovered my staff and began attacking with renewed energy. Saena hovered above Indra, beating the the *Daeva's* hands with his wings, not letting him drop his

guard for a moment. My blows started driving him back, back to the edge of the bridge. Then one final blow. Indra lost his balance and tumbled from Sinvat—a fitting penalty, since he had caused so many souls to do the same. I paused to watch his body drifting down with almost dreamlike slowness into the abyss. My breathing was deep and labored as I turned back to view the results of the fight with Zohak.

The snake-shouldered demon was lying on the ground, defeated. The hero stood over him, sword lifted to deliver the final killing blow. "No!" I cried. "Zohak must not be killed yet. He must be bound and returned to his cave until the Final War." I went slowly over to where I had dropped the Cloak of Lies and took out the special thread that I had carried along for the purpose. Very special, and difficult to obtain, it was made of the beards of women, the breath of fish, the noise of cat's footfall, sinew of bears, spittle of birds, and roots of stones. I put great faith in this particular formula, so fine that it is virtually invisible to the normal human eye, because I know that it has worked so well in previous instances. I took the thread over to the fallen demon and proceeded to tie him up as tightly as I could.

It was not until after I had done this that I noticed the bird Karshiptar moaning on the ground. Holy Karshiptar, normally the gentlest of creatures, who had probably been roused to battle against Zohak only with the greatest reluctance. "What happened?" I asked.

"One of the snakes from Zohak's shoulders managed to bite him," the simurgh said sadly. "The venom is killing him."

Again I went to the pocket of the Cloak of Lies and brought out the vial of *haoma* juice. This is a liquor known for its healing properties, sweet to the tongue and hot to the soul. I poured the juice down Karshiptar's throat, then stood back. We all gathered around and waited in silence.

Karshiptar's head jerked. His eyes opened and blinked a couple of times. His wings twitched spasmodically. And finally he pulled himself up weakly to his feet. "I think I will be all right now," he said. Then he looked at me. "Thank you." He flew off without waiting for a reply. The other birds, except for the simurgh, flew after him.

"Well, Saena," I said, "the time has come for payment." He nodded his head slowly, then turned his beak around towards his back and proceeded to pluck out one of his feathers. I accepted it from him grate-

fully. A feather from the simurgh has strong magical properties. Saena gave me a friendly farewell wink, then flew off after his fellows.

Just Zohak, the hero, and I were left on the bridge now. "You must take Zohak back to his cavern by yourself. Do you think you can manage it without getting seduced along the way?" I asked the hero.

He winced a little at my reminder of his weakness, but nodded. "What of you?" he asked in return.

"I shall go rejoin my body and then return to the Shop until somebody else needs me," I told him. "What do you want to do after you are finished with this task?"

"Lie down someplace and rest," was his immediate response.

Then I knew for certain that he was destined to be a hero, for that is the hero's constant wish—and one which is, sadly, never fulfilled. To be able to rest from heroism seems the greatest joy in the world, but somehow there is just never the time.

I wished him luck, nevertheless, and we went our separate ways.

Worldsong

GERALD W. PAGE

IT IS A song that cannot be remembered after it is heard. I can't say why. Perhaps it is too clear, perhaps too complex. It is heard on certain worlds and all you can recall of it is the hearing, not the song. It is very faint, not the song of the world it is heard on, but the song of another world, one far away. I heard it once drifting among the crystalline towers of Belpheonso where the cities themselves are like windchimes. Twice I heard the song on Aelaertos, among the floating cities of the sky. Others have told me of this song or one like it. (For can it be likely two men ever heard this song the same way? Certainly not the exact same way.) It is said the song is sometimes heard on Corbos or Blessed or Mendricart; even on fuming, bubbling Asheron. That may be so, though I have visited those worlds and never heard the song there. Some say it is the song of Shorn but others are quick to point out that Shorn is just a legend. Who has been there or spoken to anyone who has been there? Yet men believe in Shorn and I suppose that's strange. But I believe also.

I am called Eli. I am descended from humanity. We have our own legends, too. Our tales of our home world. We call it Earth. Earth: we left it so long ago. Earth is not a poet's word, like Belpheonso or Blessed or Asheron, but it can be said softly, with much feeling. I've met men who say they have been to Earth.

They tell about a small world that is just growing green again. The air is strong now, also. There is no longer much oxygen, for just as the planet changed in the past and filled its atmosphere with oxygen, so has

it changed now to accommodate other, less corrosive gases. New life is growing on the planet, adapted to new conditions. In time the Earth will produce a new race, not human but with intellect and feeling so that they will be our brothers. Perhaps, in time, they will also come to the stars. That will be millennia from now. Perhaps by then humankind will be vanished. Or perhaps the remaining humans will have forgotten Earth and remember only whatever world they live on, perhaps even believing the race originated there. Perhaps they will no longer need to live on worlds. Who can say? Now we are nomads with no home world who walk from planet to planet and sing our songs to the other life-forms. But this wasn't always how it was and we may change again. Life is the great adventure.

Three times I heard the song of Shorn and it haunted me though I could not recall its sound. Dianne had heard it also. It was she who suggested we might find our answer on Kennegrace.

We were on Mendricart. I had been there a year—the old 'Earth year' we hold to by sentiment—and she had been there almost as long. Mendricart is a young world and its people are only now discovering themselves, hoisting their first great spaceships to the stars, exploring the closer planets and discovering the unity of nature and all life. The songs we sang to the Mendricartians were the songs their world sang to us, songs as new to them as the songs of any alien world would be. It takes time and evolution to become sensitive to the world songs. One night, after entertaining a large crowd of Mendricartians, as Dianne and I walked slowly back to our own small villa, she stopped and turned to face me. There was a light in her eye that, by then, I knew well. But I had never seen it quite so intense. Her words took me by surprise. "Let's find Shorn," she said.

"Of course," I answered.

"I'm serious. Can you imagine the songs there? The tales?"

I laughed, but not a mocking laugh. She saw my reason and laughed also.

But when the laughter was over she said, "I mean it, Eli. What have we left to discover on the worlds we know?"

"We don't even know that Shorn exists. It's only a legend."

"But the song. Do you believe Shorn's just a legend?"

I groped—for an answer or for my own fears? Fear was there, I could feel it. But how could I understand?

I said, "I think I believe."

Dianne was grave, an uncommon thing for her. "If it is real, the stories have to come from somewhere. They—"

"Very obvious."

Her gravity burst like a pricked bubble. She smiled at me. Our conversation changed. But not our thoughts.

The following day we left Mendricart. "Someone might know on Kennegrace," she said. She said it again and again, and it made the decision for both of us. "They know so much there."

We were silent as we walked. But my mind was more active than my voice could ever be. I thought, strangely, of the most obvious, commonplace things.

I thought of the past, when humans used spaceships before the discovery of the Way. I thought about the other peoples, the countless numbers of them, and that only humans know the Way. It is no secret, after all. But no race except humanity understands it—now. No others even know the worldsongs except at second hand from us. Perhaps the other people of the galaxy are just at the wrong stages of evolution.

But perhaps at other times others have known. The ancient ones who inhabit the planets of the Core, for example. In the millennia of their existence they could have forgotten much. And what of the abandoned worlds, with their cities and buildings empty of people but with nothing to indicate what happened to them? Where could those people have gone, and how else could they have gotten there except through the Way?

But now, for now, the Way is known only to Earthlings. It was a part of our discovery of the Unity. For eons Earthmen searched for Unity without finding it, even before spaceflight. Perhaps their failure was because they believed Unity would make the race One, rather than teach us successfully to be Many.

But the Way was discovered and that which linked the worlds, and which a man could walk, was ours. The songs the worlds sang were ours. We walked, Dianne and I, from Mendricart to Kennegrace, which was closer to the galactic rim. We thought or else we listened to the songs

or to the Silences. When we reached Kennegrace we were changed, of course, as the Way always changes those who invade it. But we had not forgotten our mission.

Nor our songs, which the scholars of Kennegrace were anxious to hear. In the Way I had heard the echoes of a song new to me. It was a simple song and we reconstructed it easily and sang it to them.

The people of Kennegrace are gentle, skilled in kindness and with a deep and inquiring mind as well as a being that loves songs—and with many legends. When our singing was done, we asked them about Shorn.

We spent a month there, during which time the scholars searched their archives for us. What they could find they passed on to us. It wasn't very much, but our search began.

If this was my voice and not just words upon paper, I could sing a song to tell you of that search. We walked among many worlds and visited a few of them.

After many weeks of searching we were finally told, "Shorn is not of our Galaxy."

The one who told us was small. Standing, he reached barely to my waist. He was an insect being in whom you could clearly see evidence of ancestors not far removed from the beetle. Yet he was not the coldly unfeeling thing that insects are supposed to be. He spoke with clacking mandibles and we could understand his words only with great effort, though the Way gives languages as it gives songs and Unity. His people were ancient and had collected legends from many worlds.

"Shorn is somewhere in Andromeda," he told us. "But I cannot tell you how to get there. Can't you simply walk there?"

"I don't know," I said. "No one has ever left the galaxy and returned to tell of it. The Way is complex. Where there are no planets there are no songs to serve as beacons. Between galaxies there is only emptiness."

"As we are all related by Life," the beetle creature said, "our commonness must include our common failings. I am shamed that I have been so little help to you."

"But you have helped us more than anyone else," Dianne said, touching the insect creature. I thought she might sing to him, but she did not. It wasn't until sometime later that I realized there had been no real need for her to sing to him. He understood her touch.

Afterwards she told me, "We might go there by spaceships. There are plenty of spaceships on these rim worlds—spaceships built for long voyages."

"Not that long."

"We might easily earn a dozen good ships with our songs."

"Not even we could live long enough to go from here to Andromeda by spaceship," I said. "Even if we could, it wouldn't give us Shorn. We'd have the entire Andromedan galaxy to search: billions of stars, billions of planets, billions . . ."

"Billions upon billions of new things," she said fervently. "Even if there's no such place as Shorn we should go there. Think of the constant discovery. The songs must be very beautiful there."

I laughed. "Always the romantic."

"You envy me for it," she said.

That was true, but I laughed as if it weren't. I kissed her. That night we slept under the sky on a world so close to the galaxy's edge that night was black and almost starless. Almost, because one faint point of light hung low across the horizon: Andromeda itself.

After that I began to wish I could forget about Shorn. I had accepted that it was in Andromeda and we were here. Only Dianne wouldn't forget and wouldn't let me forget, though she seldom spoke of Shorn now. Her face still lifted to search the sky even where the skies were almost always empty. Shorn was in her voice when we sang.

We no longer talked about Shorn, however—and that was something. Our pretense was that we sought new songs. Yet we sought them among the rim worlds.

To find new songs you find new worlds. You walk their surfaces and if the air is breathable, you breathe it. You feel the tug of gravity—never the same on any two worlds—the pressure of its atmosphere, its heat, its cold, its exuberance or loneliness. This is Unity. The songs you heard echoed in the Way come to you.

Every world has music. In that way the old mystics, the primitive alchemists and scientists of medieval Earth were right. Music of the spheres. But it is not just perfection. It is imperfection also and the worlds sing their imperfect songs as well as their perfect ones. And both are beautiful. Both kinds are life. Or, so much more importantly, both are existence. That is the only real secret the universe has to offer us.

That's the secret man learned which taught him how to live—that the universe is itself and indifferent to humans, that it existed a long eternity without Earthlings and will continue to exist after they are finally gone. It is independent and indifferent. It is without conscious caring one way or the other, with no stake in man's survival or destruction, either one. And thus it is as easy and simple for man to continue as it is for him to become extinct. There is an option, but it is not the option of the universe or any sort of higher being. There are no options with indifference.

So the options fall to us. Even our spiritual options. And men, eventually, begin using the options wisely. The Way and Unity. A religion, to use an old, dead word; but religion beyond religion. Perhaps just one system out of an infinite number that would work.

So on a world too young yet to have conscious life, we walked and listened to new songs.

It was a planet where the ground freshed with the beginnings of new life. The oceans churned and fumed with chemicals that would eventually form living things. The songs were crude, primitive, simple; but they teemed with life and the myriad possibilities of life. The world had several moons so that at night its sky was seldom as empty as the sky of most other rim worlds.

One night I woke and saw Dianne standing a few feet away. I could see her face in the moonlight and her expression was one I had never seen before. Then I heard the song.

I heard only a fragment of it but I knew it didn't belong to this world. It touched so deeply I almost felt pain. I almost cried—not with pain but with intensity of feeling, of joy. I saw tears on Dianne's face and a look of happiness. I could sense the rapture that must be flooding her being. This was the song. The one from Shorn.

Then, suddenly, I could hear it no longer.

"It's gone," I said. "I barely heard enough to recognize it."

"I heard it all," she said. "Eli, I know. I know."

The way she stood—I'd never seen her like that. I got to my feet.

"I know," she repeated, emphatically. "Oh, Eli. Listen."

Weakly I said, "It's gone."

"But not that far. We can catch up to it. I can—"

She turned and ran from that world. I stood there, uncertain what

was happening. My thoughts were sluggish. I didn't realize right away that she was really gone.

I tried to follow after her. She was already so far away I could barely tell which way she had gone. I called after her but doubt she heard me. Once I heard her singing. She sang the song of Shorn. Then her voice vanished into the Silences.

Presently I returned to the forming world and waited a long time. But I heard only the forming songs. The Songs of Shorn had passed, as it always did, from my memory.

After a time I realized just how much I had to learn, how much more Dianne knew and felt than I did. So I left the rim and went to learn. To feel. And now I'm back.

Beyond the edge of our galaxy, where there are no worlds or stars to serve reliably as beacons, the Way becomes a labyrinth, a maze. To people like us, who can walk easily across the galaxy, guided by world-songs and the feelings and warmth of stars and planets, the emptiness of that maze is awe inspiring and a challenge, perhaps the one remaining challenge, until it is met and we can find the one beyond.

Perhaps Dianne is wandering lost among the labyrinth between the galaxies. Or perhaps the song was like a beacon to her and she followed it all the way to Andromeda. I hope it was.

Because I've returned to that rim world where native life won't form for millions of years. Because I'm waiting for the song. I think I knew now what Dianne knew. I believe I can follow the song.

Shorn lies in another galaxy with hundreds of billions of stars and worlds and worldsongs. I want to go there. I want to hear those songs. And learn them all.

What Dark God?

BRIAN LUMLEY

"... *Summanus*—whatever power he may be . . ."
Ovid's *Fasti*

The Tuscan Rituals? Now where had I heard of such a book or books before? Certainly very rare. . . . Copy in the British Museum? Perhaps! Then what on Earth were *these* fellows doing with a copy? And such a strange bunch of blokes at that.

Only a few minutes earlier I had boarded the train at Bingham. It was quite crowded for a night train and the boozy, garrulous, and vociferous "Jock" who had boarded it directly in front of me had been much upset by the fact that all the compartments seemed to be fully occupied.

"Och, they bleddy British trains," he had drunkenly grumbled, "either a'wiz emp'y or a'wiz fool. No orgynization whatsayever—ye no agree, ye sassenach?" He had elbowed me in the ribs as we swayed together down the dim corridor.

"Er, yes," I had answered. "Quite so!"

Neither of us carried cases and as we stumbled along, searching for vacant seats in the gloomy compartments, Jock suddenly stopped short.

"Noo what in hell's this—will ye look here? A compartment wi' the bleddy blinds doon. Prob'ly a young laddie an' lassie in there wi' six emp'y seats. Privacy be damned. Ah'm no standin' oot here while there's a seat in there. . . ."

The door had proved to be locked—on the inside—but that had not

deterred the "bonnie Scot" for a moment. He had banged insistently upon the wooden frame of the door until it was carefully, tentatively slid back a few inches; then he had stuck his foot in the gap and put his shoulder to the frame, forcing the door fully open.

"No, no . . ." The scrawny, pale, pin-stripe jacketed man who stood blocking the entrance protested. "You can't come in—this compartment is reserved. . . ."

"Is that so, noo? Well, if ye'll kindly show me the reserved notice," Jock had paused to tap significantly upon the naked glass of the door with a belligerent fingernail, "Ah'll bother ye no more—meanwhile, though, if ye'll hold ye're blether, *Ah'd appreciate a bleddy seat. . . .*"

"No, no . . ." The scrawny man had started to protest again, only to be quickly cut off by a terse command from behind him:

"Let them in . . ."

I shook my head and pinched my nose, blowing heavily and puffing out my cheeks to clear my ears. For the voice from within the dimly-lit compartment had sounded hollow, unnatural. Possibly the train had started to pass through a tunnel, an occurrence which never fails to give me trouble with my ears. I glanced out of the exterior corridor window and saw immediately that I was wrong; far off on the dark horizon I could see the red glare of coke-oven fires. Anyway, whatever the effect had been which had given that voice its momentarily peculiar—resonance?—it had obviously passed, for Jock's voice sounded perfectly normal as he said: "Noo tha's *better*; excuse a body, will ye?" He shouldered the dubious looking man in the doorway to one side and slid clumsily into a seat alongside a second stranger. As I joined them in the compartment, sliding the door shut behind me, I saw that there were four strangers in all; six people including Jock and myself, we just made comfortable use of the eight seats which faced inwards in two sets of four.

I have always been a comparatively shy person so it was only the vaguest of perfunctory glances which I gave to each of the three new faces before I settled back and took out the pocket-book I had picked up earlier in the day in London. Those merest of glances, however, were quite sufficient to put me off my book and to tell me that the three friends of the pin-stripe jacketed man appeared the very strangest

of travelling companions—especially the extremely tall and thin member of the three, sitting stiffly in his seat beside Jock. The other two answered to approximately the same description as Pin-Stripe—as I was beginning mentally to tag him—except that one of them wore a thin moustache; but that fourth one, the tall one, was something else again.

Within the brief duration of the glance I had given him I had seen that, remarkable though the rest of his features were, his mouth appeared decidedly odd—almost as if it had been painted onto his face—the merest thin red line, without a trace of puckering or any other depression to show that there was a hole there at all. His ears were thick and blunt and his eyebrows were bushy over the most penetrating eyes it has ever been my unhappy lot to find staring at me. Possibly that was the reason I had glanced so quickly away; the fact that when I had looked at him I had found *him* staring at *me*—and his face had been totally devoid of any expression whatsoever. *Fairies?* The nasty thought had flashed through my mind unbidden; nonetheless, that would explain why the door had been locked.

Suddenly Pin-Stripe—seated next to me and directly opposite Funny-Mouth—gave a start, and, as I glanced up from my book, I saw that the two of them were staring directly into each other's eyes.

"*Tell them . . .*" Funny-Mouth said, though I was sure his strange lips had not moved a fraction, and again his voice had seemed distorted, as though his words passed through weirdly angled corridors before reaching my ears.

"It's, er—almost midnight." Informed Pin-Stripe, grinning sickly first at Jock and then at me.

"Aye," said Jock sarcastically, "happens every night about this time . . . Ye're very observant . . ."

"Yes," said Pin-Stripe, choosing to ignore the jibe, "as you say—but the point I wish to make is that we three, er, that is, we *four*," he corrected himself, indicating his companions with a nod of his head, "are members of a little-known, er, religious sect. We have a ceremony to perform and would appreciate it if you two gentlemen would remain quiet during the proceedings . . ." I heard him out and nodded my head in understanding and agreement—I am a tolerant person—but Jock was of a different mind.

"Sect?" He said sharply. "Ceremony?" He shook his head in disgust. "Well; Ah'm a member o' the Church O' Scotland and Ah'll tell ye noo—Ah'll hae no truck wi' bleddy heathen *ceremonies* . . ."

Funny-Mouth had been sitting ram-rod straight, saying not a word, doing nothing, but now he turned to look at Jock, his eyes narrowing to mere slits; above them, his eyebrows meeting in a black frown of disapproval.

"Er, perhaps it would be better," said Pin-Stripe hastily, leaning across the narrow aisle towards Funny-Mouth as he noticed the change in that person's attitude, "if they, er, *went to sleep* . . .?"

This preposterous statement or question, which caused Jock to peer at its author in blank amazement and me to wonder what on Earth he was babbling about, was directed at Funny-Mouth who, without taking his eyes off Jock's outraged face, nodded in agreement.

I do not know what happened then—it was as if I had been suddenly *unplugged*—I was asleep, yet not asleep—in a trance-like condition full of strange impressions and mind-pictures—abounding in unpleasant and realistic sensations, with dimly-recollected snatches of previously absorbed information floating up to the surface of my conscious mind, correlating themselves with the strange people in the railway compartment with me . . .

And in that dream-like state my brain was still very active; possibly *fully* active. All my senses were still working; I could hear the clatter of the wheels and smell the acrid tang of burnt tobacco from the compartment's ash-trays. I saw Moustache produce a folding table from the rack above his head—saw him open it and set it up in the aisle, between Funny-Mouth and himself on their side and Pin-Stripe and his companion on my side—saw the designs upon it, designs suggestive of the more exotic work of Chandler Davies, and wondered at their purpose. My head must have fallen back, until it rested in the corner of the gently rocking compartment, for I saw all these things without having to move my eyes; indeed, I doubt very much if I *could* have moved my eyes and do not remember making any attempt to do so.

I saw that book—a queerly bound volume bearing its title, *The Tuscan Rituals*, in archaic, burnt-in lettering on its thick spine—produced by Pin-Stripe and opened reverently to lie on that ritualistic

table, displayed so that all but Funny-Mouth, Jock, and I could make out its characters. But Funny-Mouth did not seem in the least bit interested in the proceedings. He gave me the impression that he had seen it all before, many times . . .

Knowing I was dreaming—or was I?—I pondered that title, *The Tuscan Rituals*. Now where had I heard of such a book or books before? The *feel* of it echoed back into my subconscious, telling me I recognized that title—but in what connection?

I could see Jock, too, on the fixed border of my sphere of vision, lying with his head lolling towards Funny-Mouth—in a trance similar to my own, I imagined—eyes staring at the drawn blinds on the compartment windows. I saw the lips of Pin-Stripe, out of the corner of my right eye, and those of Moustache, moving in almost perfect rhythm and imagined those of Other—as I had named the fourth who was completely out of my periphery of vision—doing the same, and heard the low and intricate liturgy which they were chanting in unison.

Liturgy? Tuscan Rituals? Now what dark "God" was this they worshipped? . . . And what had made *that* thought spring to my dreaming or hypnotized mind? And what was Moustache doing now?

He had a bag and was taking things from it, laying them delicately on the ceremonial table. Three items in all; in one corner of the table, that nearest Funny-Mouth. Round cakes of wheat-bread in the shape of wheels with ribbed spokes. Now who had written about offerings of round cakes of— . . . ?

Festus? Yes, *Festus*—but, again, in what connection?

Then I heard it. A *name*; chanted by the three worshippers, but not by Funny-Mouth who still sat aloofly upright. "Summanus, Summanus, Summanus . . ." They chanted; and suddenly, it all clicked into place.

Summanus! Of whom Martianus Capella had written as being The Lord of Hell . . . I remembered now. It was Pliny who, in his *Natural History*, mentioned the dreaded *Tuscan Rituals*, "books containing the Liturgy of Summanus . . ." Of course; Summanus—Monarch of Night—The Terror that Walketh in Darkness; Summanus, whose worshippers were so few and whose cult was surrounded with such mystery, fear, and secrecy that according to St. Augustine even the most curious enquirer could discover no particular of it.

So Funny-Mouth, who stood so aloof to the ceremony in which the others were participating, must be a priest of the cult.

Though my eyes were fixed—my centre of vision being a picture, one of three, on the compartment wall just above Moustache's head—I could still clearly see Funny-Mouth's face and, as a blur to the left of my periphery, that of Jock. The liturgy had come to an end with the calling of the "God's" name and the offering of the bread. For the first time Funny-Mouth seemed to be taking an interest. He turned his head to look at the table and just as I was certain that he was going to reach out and take the breadcakes the train lurched and Jock slid sideways in his seat, his face coming into clearer perspective as it came to rest about half-way down Funny-Mouth's upper right arm. Funny-Mouth's head snapped round in a blur of hate. *Hate*, livid and pure, shone from those cold eyes, was reflected by the bristling eyebrows and tightening features; only the strange, painted-on mouth remained sterile of emotion. But he made no effort to move Jock's head.

It was not until later that I found out what happened then. Mercifully my eyes could not take in the whole of the compartment—or what was happening in it. I only knew that Jock's face, little more than an outline with darker, shaded areas defining the eyes, nose, and mouth at the lower rim of my fixed "picture," became suddenly contorted; twisted somehow, as though by some great emotion or pain. He said nothing, unable to break out of that damnable trance, but his eyes bulged horribly and his features writhed. If only I could have taken my eyes off him, or closed them even, to shut out the picture of his face writhing and Funny-Mouth staring at him so terribly. Then I noticed the change in Funny-Mouth. He had been a chalky-grey colour before; we all had, in the weak glow from the alternatively brightening and dimming compartment ceiling light. Now he seemed to be *flushed*; pinkish waves of unnatural colour were suffusing his outré features and his red-slit mouth was fading into the deepening blush of his face. It almost looked as though . . . *My God! He did not have a mouth.* With that unnatural reddening of his features the painted slit had vanished completely; his face was *blank* beneath the eyes and nose.

What a God-awful dream. I knew it must be a dream, now—it *had* to be a dream—such things do not happen in real life. Dimly I was aware of Moustache putting the bread-cakes away and folding the queer

table. I could feel the rhythm of the train slowing down. We must be coming into Grenloe. Jock's face was absolutely convulsed now. A white, twitching, jerking, bulge-eyed blur of hideous motion which grew paler as quickly as that of Funny-Mouth—if that name applied now—red-denied. Suddenly Jock's face stopped its jerking. His mouth lolled open and his eyes slowly closed. He slid out of my circle of vision towards the floor.

The train was moving much slower and the wheels were clacking over those groups of criss-crossing rails which always warn one that a train is approaching a station or depot. Funny-Mouth had turned his monstrous, nightmare face towards me. He leaned across the aisle, closing the distance between us. I mentally screamed, physically incapable of the act, and strained with every fibre of my being to break from the trance which I suddenly knew beyond any doubting *was not a dream and never had been . . .*

The train ground to a shuddering halt with a wheeze of steam and a squeal of brakes. Outside in the night the station-master was yelling instructions to a porter on the unseen platform. As the train stopped Funny-Mouth was jerked momentarily back, away from me, and before he could bring his face close to mine again Moustache was speaking to him.

"There's no time, Master—this is our stop . . ." Funny-Mouth hovered over me a moment longer, seemingly undecided, then he pulled away. The others filed past him out into the corridor while he stood, tall and eerie, just within the doorway. Then he lifted his right hand and snapped his fingers.

I could move. I blinked my eyes rapidly and shook myself, sitting up straight, feeling the pain of the cramp between my shoulder-blades. "I say . . ." I began.

"*Quiet!*" Ordered that echoing voice from unknown spaces—and of course, his painted, false mouth never moved. I was right; I had been hypnotized, not dreaming at all. That false mouth—Walker in Darkness—Monarch of Night—Lord of Hell—the Liturgy to Summanus . . .

I opened my mouth in amazement and horror, but before I could utter more than one word—"Summanus . . ."—something happened.

His waist-coat slid to one side near the bottom and a long, white, tapering tentacle with a blood-red tip slid into view. That tip hovered,

snake-like, for a moment over my petrified face—and then struck. As if someone had taken a razor to it my face opened up and the blood began to gush. I fell to my knees in shock, too terrified even to yell out, automatically reaching for my handkerchief; and when next I cowering-ly looked up Funny-Mouth had gone.

Instead of seeing him—*It*—I found myself staring, from where I kneeled dabbing uselessly at my face, into the slack features of the sleeping Jock.

Sleeping?

I began to scream. Even as the train started to pull out of the station I was screaming. When no one answered my cries I managed to pull the communication-cord. Then, until they came to find out what was wrong, I went right on screaming. Not because of my face—*because of Jock . . .*

A jagged, bloody, two-inch hole led clean through his jacket and shirt and into his left side—the side which had been closest to . . . to that *thing*—*and there was not a drop of blood in his whole, limp body*. He simply lay there—half on, half off the seat—victim of “a bleddy heathen ceremony”—substituted for the bread-cakes simply because the train had chosen an inopportune moment to lurch—a sacrifice to Summanus . . .

The Stuff of Heroes

BOB MAURUS

NARDI was the latest in a long line of incompetents. In his own bumbling way he upheld a family tradition dating back eight generations to his illustrious ancestor, Ephraim Pitt, a hero in the Revolutionary War. Old Ephraim, who'd failed miserably in every civilian endeavor he'd undertaken, finally achieved his moment of glory in what should have been a distinctly minor skirmish in the campaign leading up to Lord Cornwallis' surrender. Instead, before it was over—and by dint of a series of the most incredible blunders imaginable—Ephraim (then a captain) and two hundred thirty-seven New Hampshire farm boys had captured a key fortress and its entire complement of fourteen hundred British regulars—without firing a shot. The Continental Congress, convinced that such a feat could have been accomplished only by a brilliant mind with an intuitive grasp of military tactics, made old Ephraim a general. The perplexed fellow, still wondering how it all had happened, received his promotion from Washington himself, was kissed on both cheeks by Lafayette, and soon thereafter retired to a life of fame and honor as a country squire.

Yes, Nardi upheld the tradition well, never once in thirty-two years having managed to pair the right thing with the right time, yet always bumbling on—blissfully unaware of the meandering string of near disasters trailing in his wake.

Nardi favored old Ephraim; in his younger days he'd listened to countless aunts and great-aunts remarking on his uncanny resemblance to the old general and the good fortune that surely forbode for Nardi.

Eventually the talk took, and Nardi began to fancy himself destined for great things. But so far the only thing he'd inherited from his somewhat questionably famous ancestor, other than his features, was his incompetence.

Nardi considered himself, among other things, quite a handyman and delighted in rescuing discarded appliances from the town dump to repair in his basement workshop, or sending off for all manner of electronic kits to assemble. Such was his utter ineptitude, though, that even the most simple instructions were all but unfathomable and likely to produce abysmal failures which, if they worked at all, more often than not performed any but their proper function. His basement was littered with the splendid flotsam of his flawed genius. There was a vacuum cleaner that for one improbably glorious moment had blared forth the 1812 Overture from the end of its hose, then become enveloped in a pungent cloud of dirty grey smoke; a toaster which had, both times he'd plugged it in, promptly set every dog within two hundred yards to howling and running in circles; a radio which picked up only one station (and that a twenty-four-hour time hack—in Russian); and numerous other strange contraptions, each resembling some common household item, but with curious and unfathomable features. Nardi's garden of failures was a fitting testament to his peculiar genius.

His latest attempt was to build, from a superb kit with a wonderfully detailed instruction booklet (simple enough even a twelve-year-old child could follow it), a twenty-three inch color TV set, in anticipation of the upcoming NFL season. Nardi had blithely sailed through the operation with happy abandon, crossing wires here, reverse wiring transistors there, leaving shining gobs of solder strewn haphazardly about in the most unlikely places, occasionally even eliminating or misplacing or redesigning whole circuits—reasoning that so small a thing as a bridge or a capacitor could hardly be very important, or that if a ten ohm resistor would do the job a twenty ohm one would do twice as well; and (maybe because his first action on receiving the kit COD that morning had been to dump the entire contents of the crate in a pile in the middle of the living room floor) losing the parts list. Never one to let minor setbacks dampen his enthusiasm, however, Nardi pitched in, puzzling out the identities of the various jumbled components by comparison and intuition, and finished the thing in approximately nine and

a half hours. With a sigh of contented pride, he leaned back amidst the scattered unused parts and savored the beauty of it—all twenty-three inches ensconced in a rich-looking, simulated-pecan, Mediterranean-styled cabinet. Then he savored a long draught of Schlitz, quite warm by now, from the can by his right knee.

"The moment of triumph!" Nardi thought gleefully to himself as he picked up the plug. Placing the beer can on the edge of the TV, he reached out to plug in the set. This action precipitated several things, which occurred in rapid succession: an arc of blue flame several inches long, a yelp and thump as Nardi's rump hit the floor, and a gurgling sound as the half-empty can tipped and deposited its lukewarm contents into the innards of the TV set.

"Must have been something wrong with the instructions," Nardi decided as he picked himself up and gingerly inserted the plug, using several pieces of the wooden packing crate and ignoring the arc of electricity and the thin plume of acrid smoke that rose from the set as he did so. He then settled back on his haunches, and pulled the on/off button out—literally.

There was a period of ominous silence, followed by a series of howls and moans from deep within the set and an oscillating wail that set Nardi's teeth on edge. Then the set erupted to life, blazing forth with twenty-three inches of glorious color—but what color! The screen was awash in a vivid swirl of violet of every shade imaginable: Nardi was able to count thirty-two distinct hues before it dawned on him that something was amiss.

"Damn it all, anyway," he fumed. "You'd think for four hundred bucks they could at least give a body the right instructions. Oh, well, it shouldn't be too hard to fix." He glanced around for a screwdriver, found one fully twelve inches long, and flexed his knees to rise. As he did so, his right foot slipped on a discarded selenium rectifier and he pitched forward.

"Who ever heard of a purple Joe Namath?" Nardi muttered as he put out his hand to steady himself, placing it squarely in the center of the swirling screen. Before he could comprehend what was happening, his arm had disappeared to the elbow within the set and a strange, wailing roar filled his ears. In the next instant, completely off balance, Nardi pitched headlong through the screen.

He tumbled several feet through the air and was brought up with a painful thud, somewhere between "purple" and "Namath," on a broad swale of knee-high, lavender grass. Shaking his head to clear his eyes, Nardi was suddenly aware of a curious tableau being enacted not ten feet from where he sprawled. "That's not Joe Namath," he thought as his rolling eyes focused slowly on the scene.

Pukar the Perfidious, his sardonic, malevolent features twisted with lust, his pounding blood diffusing an otherwise ghostly lavender skin a vivid mottled purple, was forcing the near-naked form of a vigorously protesting, wild-haired maiden to the ground, the while attempting to fondle with obscenely wriggling fingers the heaving, perfect breasts of his victim. Numerous scratches on his face bespoke the game fight the barbarian girl was making in defense of her honor.

"Ah, my lovely, long have I dreamt and planned for this day," he cackled. "Your struggles are futile. I shall have you, and now! Think you your father the king shall long deny me your hand—and so the throne—once I have partaken of your body? I think not, Princess Lamerae, for he knows too well the penalty exacted on promiscuous maidens, be they royalty or scullery maid, in the city of Mahkaresh."

"Fiend!" the beautiful girl cried, doubling her resistance to his lecherous advances. "My father, King Mahkar, shall have your eyes plucked out by the royal vultures, and your body flayed alive and boiled in oil!"

Pukar's chilling laugh caused the first taint of fear to cloud the lovely features of the princess, then the demonic cackling came to a halt as he perceived her eyes grow suddenly wide in astonishment and hope. Pukar whirled to discover the source of her sudden change in spirit, and his mottled features molded themselves into a mask of rage as he spied Nardi, still sprawled in an ungainly heap behind him.

"What! Dog of an outlander," he muttered darkly, evidently mistaking Nardi's grass-stained madras slacks and aloha shirt for the accoutrements of some wandering barbarian. "Dare you brazenly spy thus on Pukar the Perfidious? Make haste, lout—hie you away to yonder forest to tremble and pick your nose in envy, lest Pukar in his awful rage spellcast you into the form of a farting bog toad for your presumptuousness."

Nardi, for his part, was still trying to comprehend this baffling experience, at the same time attempting to disentangle his legs from the broad, clinging blades of grass which enveloped them, and not having much success with either endeavor. In an effort to placate the sorcerer, who all the while maintained a cruelly firm grip on the struggling girl, Nardi began a disjointed, stuttering explanation of the chain of events which had brought him into this predicament.

"Enough, churl, you have exhausted my patience," bellowed Pukar, turning even more purple with apoplexy. "Now feel the sting of my wrath!" So declaiming, the wizard stiffened his arm in Nardi's direction and hurled a luminous globe of lambent violet plasma from his fingertips. Yelping with fright, Nardi flung his body to the side, pulling out great chunks of the clinging swale in his violent movement and barely missing being hit square in the face by the hurtling fireball. As it was, the thing singed his ear in its passing and vaporized a six-foot circle of grass behind him. Gathering his feet beneath him, Nardi scrambled up in panic and crouched fearfully, casting his gaze about for the most propitious means of escape. The thought flashed through his mind that as soon as he got out of this mess he was sure as hell going to send that damned company a scorching letter denouncing the shoddy quality of their products and demanding his money back.

He spied a thicket of purple bushes to his left and made a lurch in that direction, only to be tripped up by the clots of sod still entangling his churning feet. As he pitched forward, the last thing Nardi saw was the maniacally grinning wizard loosing another bolt at him. Screeching, he shut his eyes and threw out his hands in a last desperate attempt to ward off the fireball, the forgotten screwdriver still clutched tightly in his fingers. There was a blinding flash, and Nardi fainted.

He woke some time later to the tender ministrations of the savage princess. As his eyes slowly opened, the first sight to greet them was an exquisitely molded breast, its pert nipple scarcely two inches from his nose.

"Praise Veniir," the girl sighed thankfully. "My heart was heavy that you would die. Most noble warrior, thou hast saved my honor and my father's throne from that foul beast." Pointing fearfully at the scorched and blackened screwdriver lying at Nardi's feet, she asked in awe, "Pray, what manner of wondrous weapon is this that turned Pukar's magic

back upon himself? The bolt he hurled at you did strike this thing and rebound back full in his vile face. See, even now he hops about, farting most foully." She gave a deep sigh, causing her breasts to bobble and Nardi's eyes to cross violently as he tried to keep the nipple in focus. "Proud shall I be to wear the necklet of one so powerful as you," she said breathlessly. "Come, most noble saviour, I would fain consummate the ritual that will bind me to you as willing body slave. Will you have me?"

With that the girl rose and, with downcast eyes, demurely slipped the fastening which secured her miniscule girdle, revealing herself completely to Nardi's bewildered gaze. As his eyes roved over Lamerae's nubile form, the import of her words slowly became clear.

"Is my lord pleased?" the princess asked shyly.

Never one to let an opportunity slip by, Nardi answered by scrambling clumsily to his feet, ogling her lush undulating charms with what he imagined to be a look of pure sensual lust as he fumbled feverishly with his belt. As his wildly racing mind conjured up fantastic images of the myriad erotic pleasures awaiting him, he resolved to send a letter of praise to the company president himself—this sure had the Super Bowl beat all to hell!

Lamerae broke into a happy smile at Nardi's reaction, and slipped gracefully to the ground. Arranging herself on the lavender sward, she reached out to him, beckoning with her arms and her eyes. Her breath came heavy, and her recumbent body was suffused from toe to brow with a subtle flush that gave evidence of her eagerness to proceed.

Perspiring with anticipation and with his pants a tangle of madras around his ankles, Nardi hopped and hobbled toward the naked girl. Teetering precariously with each little bound and shuffle, he finally unbalanced himself completely and, with a yelp of dismay, pitched forward toward the spot where she lay waiting. As he reached out to break his fall, his outstretched hand landed squarely in the middle of Lamerae's heaving bosom. His mind, still busy hatching its erotic fantasies, noted but failed to comprehend the fact that his hand did not stop upon encountering her flesh, but continued its travel, disappearing slowly into her chest. Even now, his arm was buried to the elbow in her breast.

There came a painful roaring in his ears, and then everything ran together in a blurred violet haze that writhed and swam before his eyes.

". . . a purple Joe Namath?" Nardi muttered as he put out a hand to steady himself, placing it squarely in the center of the swirling screen. After a moment, he tried to rise, but his feet seemed to be tangled in something. He glanced down, and his face became slack with sudden bewilderment as he spied the stained snarl of madras at his shoetops.

Forringer's Fortune

JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

YOU MAY know me as Arnold Leeds, and the New England coastal city in which I lived as Longbridge. I was retired, in poor health, reclusive and—I may as well admit it—eccentric.

The routine events of daily life bored me intolerably. Through some circumstance of heredity or environment, I was irresistibly attracted to the bizarre, the anomalous, the abnormal. The harsh light of day, the din of traffic and the insipid, bustling throngs of money-grubbing pedestrians kept me indoors during ordinary hours.

At early dusk I edged out of my dilapidated little house and prowled the waterfront streets. In the old harbor, largely neglected now, lay the rotting hulks of forsaken coal barges, abandoned colliers, disintegrating oyster boats and all manner of miscellaneous craft. The setting sun etched red pools of light on the oily waters; a few late gulls cried harshly in the growing shadows; waves washed against decaying piers.

It was a desolate scene, but I loved it.

My waterfront wanderings led me to the dingy little shop of Jarvis Forringer. Although it lacked the traditional three globes, it was, to some extent at least, a pawnshop. Derelicts, winos and honest laborers down on their luck, could come in and exchange a trinket or two for a greasy dollar bill—or perhaps only a quarter—from Forringer's battered till.

But it was more than a pawnshop. In a number of safes and strong-boxes, Forringer kept jewelry of surprising beauty and value. His clientele for this merchandise, although limited in number, usually

arrived during the day in expensive new cars, in a few cases driven by uniformed chauffeurs.

Forringer himself was a most unprepossessing individual—small, sharp-featured, shifty-eyed, ferret-like, quick of mind and hand. He dressed shabbily and I doubt that his monthly water bill ran very high, even in these days of soaring utility costs.

You may ask how I could be attracted to such an unsavory-appearing person. While I deplored Forringer's obvious aversion to daily applications of soap and water, and while his appearance itself repelled me, I was drawn to him by his keen intellect and by the huge fund of arcane knowledge which he had somehow absorbed.

He knew Ennemoser's *History of Magic*, Wolfert's *Jahrbücher des Magnet*, Hauf, Molitor, Zschokke, plus dozens of other authors I had never read. He could quote at length from the old German version of the *Hexenhammer*.

I usually entered his dim cave of a shop shortly before he closed for the day. After he had drawn the shades and dropped iron shutters across the front windows, we retreated to a rear room where he served cheese (sometimes stale) and cheap wine. Occasionally I bought some relatively inexpensive curio which caught my eye.

Although Forringer's conversation fascinated me, there was something so furtive about the man's appearance and mannerisms that I never felt entirely at ease with him. Sometimes, as we talked, he would stop suddenly in the middle of a sentence and lift his head. He seemed to be listening. After a few moments he would resume the conversation with an apology.

"Have to be careful around these parts!" he'd say. "You know how these waterfront characters are—break in and cut your bloody throat for a penny!"

Time and again I told myself that I would stop visiting Forringer's shop. I became convinced that, however circumspectly, he was enmeshed in the fringes of some illicit enterprise.

Nevertheless, inevitably, my restless footsteps led me to the cob-webbed shop on Caraway Street. I nibbled cheese, sipped wine—and listened to accounts of the Zend Books, the celebrated cures of Melampus, the legendary Desert of Gobi, the sorcerers of Chaldea and so on.

After an hour or two of intriguing anecdote and speculation, Forringer's talk would begin to falter. At this point I inevitably arose, thanked him for his hospitality, and departed.

He rarely urged me to stay longer and I often had the disturbing conviction that while he sincerely enjoyed my company, he was nevertheless eager for me to leave. I realize this sounds like a paradox. It is a paradox which I wish I had never solved!

I became more and more certain that Forringer wanted me out of his shop after an hour or two—*because then his real work began*. I cannot say, specifically, what led me to this conclusion. I suppose it was Forringer's growing restlessness as the evening wore on, the lapses in his conversation, his peculiar interval of listening—for something which I never heard.

I had been visiting Forringer's shop for nearly two years before that nightmare evening when he finally revealed his hideous secret. He had, at last, come to trust me. I believe, moreover, that he was consumed by some inner compulsion to share the knowledge of his awful enterprise with at least one other human being.

The evening in question—a wild, storm-wracked night with waves slapping viciously against the sagging piers—I arrived at the shop on Caraway Street in a state of semi-collapse.

As I sank into a chair in Forringer's rear room, he regarded me with sincere concern. Instead of serving the usual cheap wine, he produced a bottle of expensive brandy. The smooth distillation flowed through my veins like liquid honey laced with fire. Very shortly I felt revived and animated.

Forringer himself imbibed freely of the brandy. His conversation soon became brilliant. He discussed Tenzel Wirdig, the professor of Rastock, and his *Nova medicina spirituum*. He spoke of Gassner, the famous exorcist of Vorarlberg; he mentioned Cagliostro, Böhme, the mystic showmaker of Görlitz, Henry Agrippa of Rettesheim and his *De Occulta Philosophia*. His conversation—as well as his brandy—flowed more freely as the evening advanced.

At length he leaned toward me with a sort of confidential leer. "I suppose you've often wondered how I've managed to accumulate such precious gems and gold as I've shown you on occasion?"

I nodded. "It's always remained a mystery to me. The waterfront stumblebums who come in here seldom have much of value to offer."

He laughed. "I just tolerate them to keep up appearances. Half of the trash they bring in I simply throw away. It's often not worth even the dimes and quarters I dole out to them."

After a final swig of brandy, he stood up. "Follow me, my friend, and you will learn the secret of Jarvis Forringer!"

Producing a powerful flashlight and a packet of candles, he started down a flight of worn steps at the far end of the shop.

"Watch your footing," he warned. "It's a bit damp further down."

Taking a firm grip on the banister, I followed him without protest.

I thought the staircase would never end. It turned and twisted until we descended in absolute darkness, save for the strong beam of Forringer's flashlight.

At last the stairs came to an end. I stepped out on solid stone, wet and slick with subterranean slime.

As Forringer swung the flashlight around, I saw that we were standing in a narrow tunnel which appeared to have been hewn out of heavy rock.

"Great heavens, Forringer!" I exclaimed. "What is the purpose of this tunnel?"

Glancing around at the glistening walls, Forringer smiled grimly. "The purpose was," he explained, "the smuggling of contraband from privateers moored at the nearby docks. There is also an old story—quite probably factual in origin—that before the War Between the States, this tunnel was used to help escaping slaves who were led out secretly at night from ships anchored offshore."

"Fascinating!" I commentated.

"Not nearly so fascinating as what lies ahead!" he replied cryptically. "Come along. We haven't got all night!"

He started down the tunnel, while I followed close behind.

The tunnel wound along for what seemed an interminable distance. Long stretches of it were straight but there were not infrequent turns and swerves which seemed to serve no sensible purpose. As we advanced, I became convinced that we were descending, albeit very gradually. The air became close and fetid; I began to wish that I had never crept down those worn stairs at the rear of Forringer's shop.

Once something huge and hairy whisked past in the darkness. Forringer cursed luridly.

"What was *that*?" I asked, startled half out of my wits.

Forringer chuckled harshly. "Don't be alarmed, my friend. That was only a rat. In these underground warrens they grow to enormous size. The feeding, you see, is—quite good. We'll run onto more of them I have no doubt!"

I made no comment but continued after him with mounting misgivings.

Suddenly I realized that we were no longer passing between walls of stone. The walls now consisted entirely of earth, although an occasional jutting rock or rusty pipe could be glimpsed.

On and on we trudged until I felt we had walked for miles.

"Forringer!" I inquired finally, "when does this end?"

He turned. Deliberately or by chance, he directed the flashlight beam at his own face which bore an appalling expression—exultation, impatience, greed and, withal, a kind of apprehension.

"It never really *ends*," he said. "It just sort of—meanders!"

We walked nearly another half mile before I understood, with a wave of inexpressible horror, where he was leading me. As we went on, I had been noticing frequent breaks, gaps and pits in the earthen walls. At length, extending from one of these sockets, I saw a number of rotting boards. Dangling out above them was the grey-white motionless arm of a skeleton.

I stopped at once, overwhelmed with abhorrence. "Forringer!" I gasped. "You've led me underneath a cemetery! You're a grave robber, a—a ghoul! Get me out of here at once!"

He turned with a sneer. "I thought you were made of sterner stuff! Where did you think I got my valuable gems—out of the air? If you want to go back, you may. But I warn you—without a light, you'll never make it. The rats will pull you down before you've got halfway!"

I leaned against the earth wall, speechless, weak with repugnance and fear.

Forringer's tone became more conciliatory. "There's nothing to be afraid of if you stay by me. This night's work will be short. I have only one new—ah—target. Old Mrs. Keswick, wealthy as Croesus, was buried here last week. I understand that her best jewels went into the casket with her."

He paused, peering at me in the darkness. "Can't you see the senselessness of it all? Precious jewels, gold, silver — exquisite rings,

brooches, necklaces, bracelets—dumped into the earth for all eternity! What purpose is served? The dead don't need them. Better they be brought back up and returned to circulation. Think of the delight they continue to give the living!"

I made no reply, half convinced that I was dealing with a madman.

Forringer turned away finally, with an impatient shrug. "You can cling here and wait for me to return or you can follow me. As you wish. I have work to do."

As he started down the tunnel, and the light receded with him, I decided the lesser terror lay ahead. At least there would be some light. I would not be left shivering alone in total darkness—or possibly not alone, if Forringer's reference to the rats was true.

The subsequent events of that night merge, shift and mirror in my mind like the kaleidoscopic, harrowing visions one experiences in a delirium dream.

As we continued along, the walls of the tunnel on both sides were sown with those ghastly sockets which contained the decayed remnants of coffins and their frightful contents. Human bones protruded at every angle, some white and stripped of all flesh, others partially covered with brown and withered patches of dried and mummified skin. A number of coffins had disintegrated completely, spilling their occupants into the tunnel. Grinning skulls, rib bones, finger joints, pelvic and thigh bones lay strewn along both sides of the burrow. I tried to tell myself that I was permitting my imagination to get out of hand, but I was sure that many of these bones bore unmistakable *teeth* marks. I remembered Forringer's warning about the rats and the huge hairy thing which had whisked past us in the tunnel.

Forringer appeared oblivious to the unspeakable charnel pit in which we found ourselves. He forged resolutely ahead, occasionally kicking aside a skull or rib case which got in his way.

At last he stopped, handing me the flashlight. "Direct it down, toward the left," he instructed me.

Like a mindless robot, I did as he demanded.

Against one wall of the tunnel lay a large canvas sack. Pulling it open, he took out a massive sledgehammer, a spade, pickaxe, crowbar and chisel.

"Follow along," he bid me, "and hold the light steady."

After some yards, he stopped again. Setting down the tools, he took the light from me and aimed it around the walls.

"Ah, here we are," he explained presently. "Old Mrs. Keswick encased in fresh cement! I can just glimpse the corner of it. Those fools very nearly dropped it right into the tunnel! That might have led to—complications!"

While I held the light, he went to work. For a small man, his muscular power was surprising. Under the pounding blows of that massive sledgehammer, old Mrs. Keswick's cement vault quickly broke apart.

After the cement vault was shattered open, the smashing of the casket locks was a minor chore.

At one point, earth cascaded down from above. Forringer cursed, but apparently he was accustomed to these minor *contretemps*. Flinging down the sledge, he took up the spade and went to work. Very shortly the casket was cleared again. The lid, with its locks and seals thoroughly battered, opened easily.

"Hold the light on her!" he told me.

In the satin-lined casket lay the shrunken body of a very old woman, heavily rouged and literally weighed down with ropes of pearls, rings, brooches, bracelets and earrings. A diamond-studded diadem sparkled in her blue-white hair.

"I happen to know," Forringer said, "that the stones in that thing are genuine diamonds." As he snatched at the diadem, the poor old woman's entire coiffure, a carefully-placed wig, slid off, revealing a wrinkled pate utterly devoid of hair.

Forringer chuckled heartlessly. "I wonder how she'd go for *that* likeness splashed on the society pages!"

Completely repelled by his words and actions, I made no reply, but leaned against the tunnel wall as I felt vertigo seizing hold of me.

Ignoring me, Forringer began quickly stripping jewelry from the withered old body.

Once he turned with a snarl. "Hold the light steady!" he rasped.

Shortly after, I felt the light slip from my hand as dizziness overcame me. The shock of events, the indescribable stench of the tunnel and the display of Forringer's savage greed were too much for me.

As I returned to consciousness, Forringer was holding the brandy bottle to my lips. He appeared now to be genuinely concerned as he helped me to my feet.

Placing one arm around my shoulders, he helped me hobble along that unforgettable passageway. He had replaced his tools, but I saw that his pockets bulged with the jewelry which he had ripped from the violated casket.

Once, as we rounded a turn of the tunnel, Forringer stopped abruptly. Just ahead, in the powerful beam of the flashlight, I saw seven enormous rats barring the way.

"Whatever you do," Forringer whispered to me, "don't run!" He stared ahead. "They'll come after you. It is their instinct. I doubt that they'll stand against the light."

We inched along, while he directed the beam of the flash directly into their eyes. We were only feet away before they drew apart to let us pass. I could see their hate-filled, hungry eyes glitter in the darkness on both sides as we stumbled past them.

I remember little more of that nightmare return journey. Somehow Forringer dragged me up the stairs to his room and settled me on a cot. The storm was still raging and I made no protest when Forringer insisted that I stay the night.

When I awoke the next morning—after a nightlong series of terrifying dreams—Forringer was preparing coffee. He had cleaned up a bit.

As we sat down at a small table, my host seemed all business. "A good night's work," he commented briskly. "I estimate the take at close to fifty thousand dollars. I may have to settle for considerably less of course. You know how it is in my field—you have to sell at a sacrifice!"

Although I was still horrified by my host's occupation and by the callousness and brutality which he displayed, I offered no criticism at the time. I was unable to swallow food, but I did manage to down three cups of scalding black coffee. Shortly afterwards I left.

Back in my own quarters, I debated my next move. Should I inform the police? I knew it was my duty to do so, and yet I hesitated. I hated treachery and, after all, I had accepted Forringer's friendship and hospitality for over two years. Beyond that, I understood the very real possibility that I myself might be implicated and regarded as an accomplice in the ghastly business. I finally concluded to do nothing.

Although my decision to remain silent did not waver, I vowed never again to visit the shop on Caraway Street.

For nearly a month I stayed away. If you ask why I returned, I am unable to say. Curiosity? Habit? A feeling of responsibility toward my

friend? I suppose my return was motivated by a mixture of all these reasons. I admit my own weakness and it would be merely asinine for me to concoct a complicated tissue of excuses.

When I returned to the dusty den on Caraway Street one dreary autumn evening, I was appalled by the change in the appearance of my friend. His frame had become gaunt; his face cadaverous. His eyes looked feverish and I noticed that his hands trembled.

He seemed happy to see me however and soon enough we were once more ensconced in his rear room sipping wine and nibbling cheese.

"I had hopes," I told him presently, "that you had given up the shop and found some other means of livelihood."

Instead of leering at me, as I expected, he said nothing for several minutes. His hand shook as he set down his glass.

"Actually," he admitted, "I have thought of it. But I just can't walk out and padlock the door. I must have a complete inventory of what remains here, and beyond that . . ." He hesitated.

I poured some more wine and waited.

"Well," he went on after a long pause, "I would have to—ah—cover my tracks, as you might say."

"The tunnel must be sealed off," I told him firmly.

"Well, perhaps, perhaps . . ." he said vaguely.

I noticed that he was no longer paying attention to me. Head raised, he was listening to something.

I listened but heard nothing.

He frowned finally. "Those filthy rats! They keep getting bigger and hungrier! I suppose someday I'll have to have it out with them!"

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Forringer, this is madness! You'll be torn to pieces down there some night! Give up this business! Seal off the tunnel and sell the shop!"

He shrugged. "You have no idea how hard I've worked. Clearing the main tunnel of fallen earth, stones, pieces of rotted pipe, all manner of debris. And then months, *years*, extending it until it reached under the very heart of the town."

He sipped some wine. "And even that was just the beginning. With the aid of old maps, I had to dig connecting tunnels under all the main cemeteries of the city! I worked like a galley slave. I was nearly killed a hundred times—buried in earth-falls, dropped into pits of water and

mud, attacked by rats, cut and gouged by protruding roots and rocks, almost asphyxiated by noxious gases. I tell you I have endured hell for whatever valuables I have acquired. And you ask me to simply walk away and leave it!"

I sighed. "I have no doubt you have worked like a—fiend. But your health is obviously being undermined. What good are gold and jewels, if you lose your health—perhaps even your life?"

Again I saw that his attention had wavered. Once more he appeared to be listening to—or for—something.

This time, I myself thought I heard a vague kind of shuffling, dragging noise somewhere beneath the building, but I could not be sure. My own nerves were in bad shape and one's imagination can magnify and distort minor sounds of no significance.

Forringer nearly dropped the bottle as he splashed more wine into his cup. "Miserable brutes! I'll clean them out one of these nights!"

At length I stood up, thanked him for his hospitality and left. I saw that it was useless to reason with him. He would go his own way, wherever it led.

After that evening, my visits became more infrequent, but my concern for Forringer grew. He continued to lose weight; his small shifty eyes glittered with a feverish light. He maintained his composure on most occasions, but I sensed that cold fear, like a deadly adder, coiled within him day and night.

He intimated to me several times that he was planning to "give up his ghoulish work," but he never did. There was always one more wealthy dowager who had been interred with a fortune in jewels decorating her desiccated cadaver. There was a miser who was reputed to have ordered gold coins placed in his coffin. Forringer even mentioned a notorious local mobster whose front teeth were filled with diamonds. (He later showed me the diamond-filled fangs of this fabulous character.) And there were always the routine burials which yielded valuable gold wedding rings, necklaces and so forth.

One evening I walked in to find Forringer already half drunk. He motioned me toward the rear room where a brandy bottle waited on the table.

I had seen him only a week before, but even in that brief time he had failed physically. The skin was stretched tightly across his cheek

bones; his eyes, sunken back in their sockets, glared with a wild light. He appeared to be in the grip of a controlled frenzy which might explode into actual madness at any moment.

In spite of his appearance however, his conversation that evening was more scintillating and brilliant than I had ever recalled it.

At first he spoke of persons and events with which I was conversant. He mentioned Lady Alice Kyteler and her demon familiar, Robin Artisson; he reviewed Horst's account of the witch prosecutions at Arras; the sorcery bull of Pope Innocent VIII; the prophecies of Balaam; the works of Swedenborg; the Salem witch trials.

But gradually his conversation took a new tack. He made references to the Cthulhu Mythos, to various ancient entities, old when the earth was new, who still existed somewhere in the black depths of the sea.

"I have reasons to believe," he told me, "that various areas right here in New England were a sort of foci for the ancient old ones! Their evil still lives! I tell you they are alive—and waiting! And even now . . . who knows . . . ?" His voice trailed off; he seemed to be listening again.

I shrugged impatiently. "You have been reading the works of too many hack fictioneers," I said. "How can you believe such nonsense?"

He turned on me savagely. "Nonsense? You fool! If you have never studied Lovecraft, do not display your ignorance to me! He was, truly, a haunted man, because he had discovered truths which can never be disclosed to the general public—truths which would wither the souls of most of us! He had to mask his frightful discoveries under the facade of contrived fiction. But I tell you there are truths in his works which have made even eminent scientists shiver with dread!"

I smiled tolerantly. "That I would indeed doubt!"

He glared at me. "Let me tell you something more. You have seen the tunnel which extends under this very building. I was correct in saying that it was used by smugglers and by escaping slaves. But it was not hewn out for that purpose. That tunnel extends back through the centuries! It may be thousands of years old! Who chiseled it through the rock? And for what purpose? I have learned that even the native Indians avoided this immediate area. Before their extermination by the whites, they kept alive a legend about this place. Translated, their description of the area is: 'The entrance-way of the great devil gods from the sea!'"

"They were probably referring to marauding whites," I said.

He sneered at me with contempt. "Please leave," he ordered. "I can tolerate your ignorance and skepticism no longer."

I left at once, stung by his insult.

Less than two weeks later of course, I was back again. I knew Forringer had been drunk when he ordered me from his shop and I do not possess a vindictive and unforgiving nature, whatever my other faults.

I returned to find a twitching, half-starved human wreck. Forringer welcomed me warmly, however, and apologized for his previous remarks.

I sighed as we sat down in his rear room. "Forringer, I'm afraid I'll have to risk another tongue-lashing. You are—literally—falling apart before my eyes. Unless you shut up this place and see a doctor, I shall have to take steps of my own."

He showed no anger, only apathy. "Too late. Too late," he muttered. "Listen! I can hear them now!"

As we listened together, I could indeed hear a scrabbling, sliding sort of sound arising from somewhere beneath the shop.

Forringer threw down a gulp of brandy. "They've got so big and voracious, I've been afraid to go into the tunnel. The miserable creatures! Why were they ever created?"

I became convinced that Forringer was cursing the rats only to mask some other thing which he feared, but I gave no indication of this.

"Why were cockroaches created?" I countered. "Or lice? Or venomous snakes?"

He paid no attention to my remarks. "If only I could sleep! I have slept only a few hours during the last week!"

"You won't last long at this rate," I told him bluntly. "And you know perfectly well that I can really do nothing unless you cooperate."

A semblance of normality returned to him. He nodded. "I know, I know. And I appreciate your good intentions. I shall never forget your friendship."

But it was useless to reason with him. He refused to close the shop and he refused to leave it. He would not see a doctor, even though I assured him I knew one who would make house calls.

At length I left, with a sense of defeat and hopelessness. I returned home with a heavy heart. I did not expect to see Forringer alive again.

I did, however—and my life ever since has been one of endless

nightmares and speculation which leads me at times to the brink of insanity.

I had some personal business to attend to and did not get back to the shop on Caraway Street for nearly two weeks.

One windy March evening, while the gulls cried and the black waters chuckled and whispered beneath the deserted piers, I returned once more to visit my grave-robbing friend.

To my surprise, I found the door unlocked and the iron window shutters still up.

I went inside and called. "Forringer!"

There was no reply.

I called again. "Forringer!" Again no response.

Walking to the rear room, I saw that the cellar door stood open. Moving to the head of the staircase, I peered down. Far below, I made out the beam of a light.

Starting down, I tripped and nearly fell headlong. Swearing, I returned to the shop, located a large candle, lit it, and started down the stairs again.

I was nearly halfway down those rickety stairs before the flaring light of my lifted candle revealed the form of Forringer crouched against the tunnel wall, flashlight in hand.

I noticed large stacks of crates piled against one wall of the tunnel but paid scant attention to them at the time.

I called out, but Forringer did not look up. I doubt that he heard me. He seemed to have turned to stone; his bulging eyes followed the beam of the flashlight gripped in his hand.

I descended a few more steps, rounded a turn of the staircase—and near-madness seemed to freeze my brain.

Approaching Forringer from the end of the tunnel which led toward the sea was no rat but an entity out of hell itself. My puny descriptive powers cannot adequately limn the creature in familiar words.

The thing appeared alien in all aspects, partially squamous, but covered with a glistening membrane which alternately glowed red and black. Its fixed, staring eyes, huge and unwavering, held the coldness and inexorable hate which only creatures of the outer gulfs could convey. It hitched itself along the floor of the tunnel by means of sinewy tentacles which served as limbs. The underside of each black tentacle was fixed with disc-like attachments which appeared to grip the slick

stone like suction cups. The hideous thing flattened out as it advanced. Had it stood upright, it would have been the size of a full-grown horse.

Forringer was, quite literally, paralyzed with fright. He could not budge. His protruding eyes seemed held immovably in their sockets.

I myself was helpless. I stood on the stairs like a statue, candle lifted, stricken into absolute incapacity.

Actually, the fearful invader advanced quite steadily. At the time, however, it seemed only to inch along. I think Forringer suffered more mental, psychic agony in those relatively few moments than he had in his entire previous life.

At last it reached him. One of the tentacles shot out with appalling speed, lashed across his face and fastened itself into his flesh.

If I should live forever, I shall never forget Forringer's scream. It rings down the years, down the decades.

As I watched, weak with terror, Forringer shriveled before my eyes. I could almost see the blood leave his veins. In less than a minute he resembled a withered mummy, drained of every last drop of blood.

The monstrous, vampiric destroyer dropped him briefly, but it was not finished. Two shorter, slender sets of tentacles shot out. A small disc at the end of each of them entered Forringer's eyes, which were plucked from their sockets. The tentacles next thrust into Forringer's nostrils. I saw with sickening horror that the thing was siphoning out his brain.

And even then it was not finished. More tentacles wrapped themselves around what remained of his pitiful frame. His clothes were torn to shreds and every inch of his flesh was systematically stripped from his bones.

When the unspeakable creature was finished, nothing remained of Forringer save a broken, red-smeared skeleton.

The thing turned away at last, its busy tentacles testing the air. Finally, inevitably, those cold, remorseless eyes, formed in the far reaches of some inconceivably alien universe, turned themselves on me.

At last, and only just in time, I was galvanized into action.

The nightmare shape shot to the base of the stairs with terrifying speed.

Dropping the lighted candle, I whirled, raced up the stairs, through the shop and out the door.

I was still running, about two blocks away, when a tremendous roar

shook the entire waterfront area. I was hurled to the ground and momentarily stunned.

Bruised and bloodied though I was, I got up and kept on running. I didn't stop until my breath failed and I collapsed on the sidewalk.

Somehow, I reached home. I learned later, through the newspapers, that Forringer's shop had been at the very heart of a devastating explosion which had leveled crumbling old buildings for blocks in the neglected waterfront streets.

Recalling the piles of cartons which I had seen stacked in the tunnel beneath Forringer's shop, I understood what had caused that mighty blast.

As I fled that indescribable invader from another realm of time and space, my lighted candle, dropped as I ran, had landed among those crates, packed with dynamite, and set off the blast. Forringer had indeed intended to seal up the tunnel—but he had procrastinated too long.

I assume that the monster was destroyed. At least I hope so. And I fervently hope that the tunnel caved in and was sealed for all time. Since a subsequent investigation made no mention of it, I believe this to be the case.

Shortly after that climactic evening, I sold my house and moved inland. Today I would not set foot in any town or city which lies within a hundred miles of the sea.

And now I read the works of H. P. Lovecraft with the greatest respect.

Before the Event

DENYS VAL BAKER

THE EXTRAORDINARY sense of apprehension, a kind of fearful awareness of some terrible impending experience, first came upon Robert Carrington when he was driving home from his London office one summer evening. He lived in one of those outlying areas which gave a faint illusion of being almost in the country, while yet enabling the journey from house to office to be made in just under an hour. Now, on this evening, he had at last broken free of the endless traffic jams and was heading at some speed along the last few miles of comparatively open roadway. At the last minute, reaching the 40-mile speed limit sign at the entrance to his village, he slowed down, then swung round a sharp bend into the tree-lined avenue that eventually led to his own semi-detached home. On the way he waved to some of the neighbours—old Mr. Scranton, bent diligently over his herbaceous border, the Taylors sitting in deck-chairs on their verandah, the Elliot boys having a game of clock golf, pretty little Nelly Hurst playing some game with a ball on her father's newly tarmaced drive. It was that sort of place, a little genteel and middle-class, pleasant enough, too. In all the ten years he had lived and prospered there Robert Carrington had never known anything really untoward to happen.

This was what made the unfamiliar mood of depression which seemed to have overcome him more unusual. When he had set out from London he had felt as he generally felt, a little tired from a hard day at the office, looking forward to getting home as quickly as possible and relaxing with a gin and tonic before the evening meal. By the time he

finally turned the car into the garage, he was pale and trembling, and filled with a most alarming feeling of dread.

Sitting in the car, trying to compose himself before attempting to make a normal entry into the family fold, he sought for some explanation. He had felt all right driving through South London, even setting out along the by-pass. It had been later on, as he neared the end of his journey, that the strange feeling had begun. At first it had just been a niggling thing, an irritating sense of worry. But what had he been worrying about? It couldn't have been the driving, the road was clear, there had been surprisingly little traffic coming up to the village. The day's events at the office—no, nothing there to be worried about. Something waiting for him at home?—but no, that was ridiculous, all that awaited was pleasant, a quick gin and tonic, dinner with his wife and two children, maybe watching television afterwards. . . .

Then what? For there was no doubt about it, the worry had grown, had turned into very real apprehension—indeed, just as he reached the village he had experienced a blinding moment of outright fear, so that it had been all he could do to prevent himself stopping the car there and then. Instead, cross with himself, he had driven on and up to the house and into the garage. After a while the memory of that terrible moment had dimmed: but he was left with the persistent apprehension, no doubt about that. It hung all around him, like a dull ache. At last, realizing he was not going to be able to will it away, he shrugged wearily, and took it with him into the house.

Although he did his best to pretend nothing was wrong, his wife sensed the nervousness, and persuaded him to have an extra drink, which was probably a good idea as it enabled him to get through the evening meal in a fairly natural manner. Then, sitting watching television, he was able to delude himself that he was beginning to escape from the mood. But by the time the play was over and the kids had gone to bed and his wife had shut the television off and they stretched their legs before going up to bed, he knew that things were just as bad as ever.

"What on earth's wrong?" said his wife. "You look quite washed out."

"I know."

He hesitated, wishing he could explain, as much for his own sake as

hers. Suddenly he had a strange desire to get up and walk over to the windows of the sitting room which looked out upon the tree lined avenue. Out there, he knew everything was quiet and peaceful . . . yet, almost immediately, he became aware of an underlying sense of—well, menace was the only word for it. Menace.

With a quick, un-natural movement he grasped the curtains and drew them right across, blocking out the cool night air.

His wife looked round in astonishment.

"Why did you do that?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know. I just felt . . ."

"Oh, really! It's so terribly hot!"

Not taking him seriously, she got up and parted the curtains again. She stood there for a moment savouring the sweet smells of fragrance from the garden. With his back still turned away her husband said gruffly,

"What's—what's it like out there?"

"Like? Why you know what it's like—it's a lovely cool summer evening. Robert, what *is* the matter?"

"I don't know . . . nothing."

He shook his head, still turned away. He knew that he was afraid to turn back to face the window and whatever lay outside, intangible and illusory though it might be.

Mumbling something, he went off to bed. By the time his wife had joined him he was curled up in a corner, inviolate, obviously wanting to be left alone. She hoped he would fall asleep quickly and feel better in the morning. If not she might try and persuade him to take a day off from the office. His nerves really did seem on edge.

Over the next few days Robert Carrington's nerves became very much more on edge. Others beside his family began to notice it. People at the office. "Don't want to be nosy, old boy," said his boss, "but are you having a spot of domestic trouble or anything? You look ghastly." Neighbours, too. Old Mr. Scranton commented that he looked proper parched, and their close friends the Taylors suggested he needed a holiday. Even little Nelly Hurst, who was almost invariably playing about outside her house when he came back, came dancing after him

one night and called out gaily, "Don't worry, Mr. Carrington, it may never happen!"—and skipped away again, like a pretty young fairy.

God, he thought, safe in the seclusion of the garage, where he had taken to spending a while each evening regaining his composure, is it as obvious as all that? One day he buried his face in his hands as if trying to obliterate strange visions . . . but when he raised his face again, as though there were visions (although there never were) the *feeling* remained.

It was the feeling which worried him most of all, which was the most difficult thing to explain to anyone like his wife, or even the doctor he eventually went to see.

"It's just that I have this awful sense of—well, blame, you might say—or guilt, perhaps. I don't know how to put it, Doctor, but often when I'm walking about in the village I have the strangest feeling . . . as if people are watching me, accusingly—blaming me for something—something awful. But—I don't know what it is, do you see? That's the terrible thing."

There, he had managed in a way to express it with a certain degree of clarity. But, alas, the doctor, naturally enough, simply saw it as a pretty straightforward case of anxiety complex and nervous tension.

"I shouldn't worry too much, Mr. Carrington. It's fairly common these days, especially among business people. Nothing serious, I can assure you. I'll prescribe some pills that will bring quite a lot of relief, I think you'll find."

Possibly pills might have helped, but somehow Robert Carrington could not persuade himself to take them. He knew they would simply be tranquillizers of some kind, and he feared that their sole effect would be to lull his troubled sense into a state of false security. By now he was quite convinced that there must be some other answer to his problem. So he took the pills home, put them in a cupboard, and left them there.

He began, each day, trying to grapple with his problem. He knew it was growing to alarming proportions because already he was reaching a stage where he found himself making excuses for not going out anywhere—not into the village, not for an outing, not even to visit neighbours.

"Robert, what is it? What's wrong? Please tell me," said his wife. Her

look of sadness touched him deeply. It was as if—and this frightened him even more—as if there was an implied recognition that already he was beyond her help.

"Oh, my dear," he exclaimed, unbearably moved! "Oh, my dearest!"

And he embraced his wife suddenly, fearfully, as if almost afraid to let her go again.

"Robert," she said gently at last, "You really must have a rest or a change or something."

"A rest?" he said vaguely. "A change?" He frowned, and shook his head. It would be no good; he would go away, and come back, and it would all start again. He felt sure of that. But what?

What indeed? From the time he drove off from the house in the morning until he finally lay in bed at night, unable to sleep, listening for strange sounds, he strove desperately to find some explanation. There was something, something awful, and he was no nearer to knowing what it was than on that first day when the mood caught up with him. Not that he was under any delusions about it being a passing mood. It was something with him, he knew, for a long time—perhaps, he sometimes thought anguishedly, until his dying day.

But what? After a while other people began asking, becoming worried. He shrank awkwardly from their questions just as, he had noticed, he was tending to shrink more and more from human contacts around him. It was as if—as if there were already some greater menace about such contacts. And worse, he came to have the feeling that these contacts in themselves might involve some sort of risk, exposing him to public disapproval. Yes, that was it. . . . Suddenly one day, driving home, just as he reached the familiar village signs, he had a clear, almost blinding awareness of other people's dislike. Or rather, more than that. a kind of *hatred*. He drove home that night without daring to look right or left, not acknowledging the usual greetings, afraid that he might recognize something of the hidden, swelling antagonism.

It was a terrible new knowledge that he now took with him everywhere: the fact that all around him there existed some very real kind of mounting dislike for himself. Not just the dislike of a single person, either, but of many—perhaps, for all he knew, of the whole community.

He wished he could have tried to talk about it, to explain what he felt to someone. Surely he could speak to his own wife? One evening,

desperately, he tried to bring himself to do so: but then, irrationally, he found himself remembering that evening when he had sensed the lurking antagonism outside and had drawn the curtains, and how, without considering his feelings, she had drawn back the curtains, exposing him to the unknown. No, he could not even talk to his own wife.

It was at this stage, perhaps not surprisingly, that Robert Carrington began drinking. He had always been a drinker in what might be called moderation. Now he began drinking a great deal, indeed most immoderately. Despite the fact that it obviously affected his office work, he began drinking in the lunch hour, sometimes three or four whiskies. When he got home in the evening he took to slipping in a couple of quick extra drinks when his wife wasn't about.

Finally, he discovered the extra benefit of a drink or two on the way home from work: there were several quite pleasant pubs. . . . He was not drinking for drinking's sake, by any means. The fact was that, through all the faint haze created by his general drinking, he had become aware of a steady and quite terrifying magnification of his fears and apprehensions. For some reason he was finding it more and more difficult to bring himself to set off on that hour's journey home. Sometimes he had to literally force himself to get into the car, switch on the ignition key, and start for home. The feeling of desolation, of impending disaster—even of some kind of doom—was so strong now that if it had not been for the newly discovered alleviation offered by his pub calls he knew that he might never have completed the journeys. So he had one whiskey and soda at this pub, and a second at that pub, and a third . . . and in due course a fourth at a pub nearer to home. And each evening the drinks served to give him some kind of momentary courage, so that there were even times when he might pluck up courage enough to nod briefly to Mr. Scranton, to wave to the Taylors, to nod at the Elliot boys, even to catch an approving glimpse of little Nelly Hurst in her pink dress chasing her bright yellow ball. . . .

But then he had only been back in his house a short while when the Dutch courage was gone, and he began to suffer afterthoughts: about the way old Mr. Scranton had eyed him, the way the Taylors had seemed not to wave back, how the Elliot boys had seemed to ignore his call. . . . And Nelly Hurst? Had she just gone on playing? Or what had

she done? He struggled hard, in the dark hours of the night, as if in some way the absurd solution might answer all his other questions, to remember what Nelly had done with that bright yellow ball?

The next evening, sunshine bathing everywhere in a glow of well being, Robert Carrington came driving home as usual from his London office. He had drunk rather more than usual during the day, so that his extra drinks on the drive home were more potent than normal. Driving rather fast—for he knew himself to be an experienced and thoroughly reliable driver—Robert Carrington swept into his familiar village at a speed considerably beyond the prescribed 40 miles per hour. With a wild screech of brakes he managed to swing round the corner of the familiar tree-lined avenue, and then roared at a totally unsuitable speed down towards his own house. Like a man in a daze he failed to see the startled greeting of old Mr. Scranton, the suddenly perturbed waves of the Taylors, the half formed warning cry of one of the Elliot boys—or the last minute rolling to safety, on the other side of the road, of the bright yellow ball. He did not see, but felt with every agonized nerve in his body, the dull thud as the steel-grilled bonnet of his car hit the happy, laughing pink-dressed memory of Nelly Hurst, and hurled her into eternity.

"You mad devil!" cried a voice.

"That poor little girl . . . is she?"

"I'm afraid so. Will someone call an ambulance?"

"And the police. . . ."

"As for that drunken swine. . . ."

"He ought to be lynched. . . ."

And sitting slumped helplessly over the wheel of his finally silent car—too late, oh, too late, too late!—Robert Carrington recognized at last the awful and terrible truth.

It was all just beginning.

In 'Ygiroth

WALTER C. DEBILL JR.

In 'Ygiroth, where once the vile
And hairy things that passed for men
In long forgotten elder times
Did strut in arrogance and bow
To nameless things from outer spheres,
Now only baneful shadows crawl
In 'Ygiroth.

HIGH ABOVE him rose the city, deep in a shadowed cleft where the gentle lower slopes of Lerion ended and the jagged, slender spire of her uttermost peak began its long thrust into the hazy sky of Dreamland. Unpeopled and dreaming it had lain through the slow centuries of solitude and decay, and until now no man had come to seek out its dark secrets. Only he, Nylron the Acolyte, had dared follow the sparkling river Skai north to its headwaters in the high valley of Mynanthra between Lerion and craggy Dlareth and then travel the rock-strewn meadows on Lerion's northern shoulder around and upward to where brooding 'Ygiroth slumbered. He tilted the furred brim of his hat to shade his eyes from the setting sun and urged the wiry Bnazic pony on toward the low outer wall.

No one knew where the men of 'Ygiroth had come from or when they came, for the green shadows of Mynanthra had already flickered with their furtive stalking and echoed to their eery hunting cries when Nylron's ancestors had come from the east forty centuries ago to settle the fertile valley of the Skai and build Ulthar and Nir and Hatheg.

Those sturdy tribesmen had instinctively disliked the men of 'Ygiroth, finding them a little too short, a little too hairy, and a little too silent as they crept through the forests. Perhaps if their brow-ridges had not jutted so far forward, giving them an unpleasantly beady-eyed look, or if they had cooked the flesh of the buopoth before dining, the men of the Skai valley might have sought peaceful intercourse with them but as it was, none but a few adventurers of dubious repute had ever bothered to learn their coarse whispering language. It was from these ill-regarded and invariably ill-fated individuals that such scraps of lore as were known to the men of the Skai had come.

Not clever were the men of 'Ygiroth, and their stone spears and necklaces of wolves' teeth seemed ludicrously backward to the intelligent and inventive men of the Skai. Very arrogant they were about their skill in hunting the gentle buopoth, though most of their success came from the use of the half-tame kyresh as both hound and steed. This morbid relic of an older time, long extinct in other parts of Dream-land, had a basically equine body which could be ridden by the more intrepid chieftains, a long blood-hound muzzle which could scent prey at great distances, and enormous claws which, together with a mouth full of great irregular fangs, did much more damage in the hunt than the crude spearheads. It did not seem to bother the 'Ygirothians that the vicious and excitable brutes took as great a toll among the hunters as of the hunted—if the hunt succeeded it left fewer to divide the spoils, and if it failed, fallen comrades would not be wasted by the hungry survivors.

Even the domestication of this treacherous monstrosity had been beyond the abilities of the 'Ygirothians themselves. They had been taught and aided by a more formidable and sinister being. Their notion of time was so vague that they could not say whether it was ten or ten thousand centuries since the Thing in the Yellow Mask had come to them and taught them to make spears and ride the kyresh and eat fresh-killed meat. And when asked what the Thing demanded in return, they smirked evilly and made crude evasions.

It was the Thing which had made them build 'Ygiroth to honor It and Its unseen brothers, eldritch abnormalities from outer spheres of time and space whose ineffable forms and non-forms could never have been made tolerable to men by any amount of yellow silk or hypnotic

incense. It had taught them to place stone upon stone in a remote cleft on Lerion which had been a place of outer evil before men existed, and It had directed the labors of countless terrified generations until the inept beast-men had completed a citadel of horror unmatched in Dream-land (for grim Kadath is not truly contiguous with any space men know or dream of).

Only one man of the Skai had ever been within the walls of 'Ygiroth and returned, and Lothran the Necromancer had said little that could be understood. He had reached Ulthar at sunset, raving hysterically of formless horrors from which he fled, horrors which he refused to name. He had been quieted with a strong dose of poppy gum and left to rest in an upper room of the inn, but in the morning when the elders of Ulthar entered the room in hopes of a more coherent revelation, they found nothing but an open window and a stench of carrion, of lightning and of singed flesh. Nothing, that is, unless one credits the tale, whispered by foolish gossips, that old Atal found one of Lothran's boots behind the bed, and that the boot was not empty.

The men of Ulthar and Nir and Hatheg would have been content to leave such unpleasant neighbors alone in their high valley were it not for the disappearance of several of their young maidens each Walpurgis and Yule and of plump specimens of both sexes at odd times throughout the year. The people along the Skai were quick to connect the former with strange lights and drumming in the distant hills and the latter with the footprints in their gardens of short, broad-footed men. Thus from the earliest times small bands of brave men had set out to destroy 'Ygiroth and its inhabitants. Each time, as they approached the shadowy forests of Mynanthra, heavy clouds would gather and they would find themselves ringed with many-colored bolts of lightning. Most turned back at this point, but the survivors among those who did not told of discordant music heard beneath the howling and laughter of the unseen men of 'Ygiroth, of charnel vapors and a distant form draped in yellow silk. Few indeed lived to tell of the sentient whirlwinds that keened and rushed through the murky glades and set upon men like unseen hounds, rending and mangling body and soul.

It was in the reign of King Pnil of Ulthar that the warriors of the Skai had challenged 'Ygiroth for the last time. Every able-bodied man had marched, armed this time with charms and spells of the Elder Ones

as well as tools of war. No resistance was met, although the vanguard heard padding feet retreating through Mynanthra and followed fresh claw-marks of the kyresh right up to the gates of the city. Arriving at sunset and not wanting to assault the unknown defenses in the dark, they camped before the walls.

No warrior of the Skai-lands slept during that long night of suspense and brooding menace, none could forget the night-long crescendo of asymmetric rhythms on drums of stretched hide and hollowed bone or the jeering and insinuating voices from the dark crowing of the incomprehensible horror to be unleashed at dawn. As the first saffron rays struck the spire of Lerion silence fell with the force of thunder. For an interminable moment no one breathed, no eye moved from the still shadowed walls of 'Ygiroth. Then began that hideous silent exodus which haunts the legends and fireside tales of Ulthar.

As the first of the men of 'Ygiroth came scrambling over the walls and the gates were flung wide to let out dozens, then hundreds and thousands, all running straight for the ranks of the Skai, it was taken to be a charge, an attempt to overwhelm the besieging forces. But men wondered why they ran in silence, and as the first of them drew near it was seen that they were unarmed. Then as they rushed heedless onto the waiting spears men at last saw their mad, mindless eyes and knew that a terror beyond knowledge or nightmare had come to 'Ygiroth, and that 'Ygiroth was doomed.

When the last beast-man lay crumpled on the gory meadow, the warriors of Ulthar departed in awe, not daring to enter the city and raze it. Since then no man had ventured there, and were it not for the whispers of Lothran the Necromancer perhaps none ever would. But before he vanished Lothran had whispered certain things to the high priest Atal, and in his old age Atal had tried to banish these things from his dreams by writing them down on parchment. Too cleverly he had hidden that parchment, and the priests of Nodens had been unable to find and destroy it despite his incoherent deathbed pleas. And now Nyron the Acolyte had found it and had read things which should never be written down.

Among less mentionable things Nyron had read of the evil secrets taught by the Thing in the Yellow Mask to the priests of 'Ygiroth, secrets they had neither the wits nor the courage to exploit, secrets

which could have made them masters of all Dreamland and perhaps even of the waking world. They had merely carved them on the walls of the labyrinth beneath their temple in the foul Aklo tongue taught them by the Thing. Unfortunately for Nylron, he was a true scholar of this primordial language, and not without ambition.

The journey had taken him four days; the first along the fertile banks of the Skai, whose shady fringe of willows bade him rest and delay; the second through gradually rising hills where spring wild flowers questioned the value of ambition; the third in dark and cool Mynanthra, where a silent buopoth warned that time may stand still; and the fourth up stony mountain paths where the sky grew inhospitable. As he entered the city black clouds were rolling in from the north and the sun lost sight of Lerion.

He found the city surprisingly well preserved. Few of the buildings had collapsed, the tread of time being shown more subtly by cracked stone, precariously leaning walls and an occasional fallen roof. Only twice were the narrow, tortuous streets blocked with rubble, forcing him to detour even narrower alleys. He thought of certain rumored corpses, in which decay is said to be unnaturally slow and circumspect.

The great beehive-shaped temple was on a high ledge at the rear of the city and by the time he had threaded the convoluted streets up to the broad plaza in front of it the first heavy raindrops had splattered on the pavement. He paused only a moment to wonder how the vast dome had survived the centuries of mountain storms and led the pony up the gentle ramp through the only opening, a tall narrow trapezoid topped by a small capstone.

It was quite dark inside, but he kindled a resinous torch and soon saw that the temple was one enormous chamber, cluttered with a gloomy forest of pentagonal columns. At first he saw in them no geometrical arrangement at all, but gradually he perceived an odd asymmetrical regularity which he found disturbing to contemplate. He could barely make out seven large statues of kyresh spaced along the circular wall, some blindfolded, others with staring eyes and open jaws. There was a peculiar sour smell in the air and each step echoed from the dome above. The only natural aisle among the columns led straight back to the rear of the temple and Nylron led the horse, skittish now from the approaching storm, as far as a small stone post of indeterminate pur-

pose. Tethering the horse to the post and removing the heavy pack, he proceeded down the aisle to what appeared to be the main altar. It was a wide irregular heptagon surmounted by a statue of a robed and hooded figure holding a spear in one hand and a small figure of a buopoth in the other. Before the statue lay an oval opening and, climbing up on the altar stone, he found stone steps leading downward into the living rock of Lerion.

Downward he went in a huge spiral, circling until he had lost all sense of direction. At last the stairs ended and he found himself in an intricate labyrinth of narrow passageways whose moss-grown walls sloped inward at the top, occasionally opening into substantial low-ceilinged rooms partitioned with arcades of trapezoidal arches. To be certain of finding his way out again Nylron turned always to the right and found himself again spiralling, this time inward.

In the center of the labyrinth was a room almost as large as the temple above and arranged similarly with seven kyresh and a central altar. Before the statue on the altar was a large flat stone, suggesting a covered opening. But what arrested Nylron's attention was the circular wall of the room, for it was completely covered with an inscription in the Aklo tongue.

The uncouth characters of brutish scribes were not easy to read, but Nylron could follow most of them and knew that the rest would yield to patient scholarship in the archives of Ulthar. He read of the feeble gods of earth and how they can be manipulated. He read of the Other Gods who once ruled and shall rule again, of Azathoth, the centripetal impetus of all cosmic chaos, of Yog-Sothoth, the all-pervasive horror which lurks in the inner spheres of existence, of Nyarlathotep, who sometimes shrouds his form in yellow silk and sometimes in mind-blurring illusion. He read of the rewards for their chosen instruments, and hints of what might befall those instruments which failed. And finally he read a terrible passage, carved in immaculate calligraphy on an iridescent plaque harder than Nylron's garnet ring, which told of the joke played by Nyarlathotep on his minions when they summoned him and he declined to come. For he had sent instead his half-brother and other face, a ravenous and by no means sane entity which could radiate intolerable horror like a poisonous vapor.

As he finished this vile postlogue his torch began to flicker wildly

and he saw that it had nearly burned out. He thought of the difficult way back through the labyrinth and shuddered. His composure did not improve when, passing the altar, he saw the symbol carved on the flat covering stone and noted the recent disturbance of the moss around it.

The way back proved disconcertingly difficult. At times he almost believed that the arcades and passages had been shifted since his trip inward. Faster and faster he went, frantically exploring multiple branches and dead ends. The padding echoes of his soft-soled boots seemed to conceal more stealthy footsteps and a distant grating of stone on stone. Once he could have sworn he caught a glimpse of yellow silk disappearing into a trapezoidal archway. He found the entrance to the upward spiral just as the torch winked out.

He calmed down somewhat in the spiral shaft and made his way rapidly upward by feeling along the left-hand wall. Total lack of sight raised his other senses to an acute pitch and he could plainly hear the stamping of the horse after each burst of thunder. As he neared the top he could hear the rain itself and feel the dampness in the air. Emerging into the inky blackness of the temple he was unpleasantly aware that the moisture had brought out the odd sour smell much more strongly. He felt his way to the edge of the altar, climbed down, then moved out blindly toward the shuffling and stamping of the horse. He almost tripped over the pack and his reflexively outstretched hand touched the smooth hair of the pony's flank. He was patting and stroking it reassuringly when he heard the sound, so incongruous that he took a full second to identify it as the frantic whinny of his horse. What made it incongruous was the fact that it came from outside the temple. At that instant a lightning flash lit up the doorway, silhouetting the gaping jaws of the kyresh and the masked monster that held its reins. He felt its hot fetid breath just before the teeth closed on his head.

Outside in the rain and the dark the horse's hooves clattered madly away through the dead streets of 'Ygiroth.

The Last Hand

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

WHEN MARTIN saw the blotches moving down the compartment window, against the thick twilit streams of smoke, he thought at first that it was raining. Then he realized the blotches were flies nuzzling the pane, hurtling toward him like curdled drops of the smoke. Already one fat fly like a lump of soot was crawling toward the gap at the top of the window, through which a breeze had flapped at Martin's face all the way from Liverpool. He sat for a moment waiting until the fly entered, so that he could kill it; then he threw his book of crosswords into his case and made for the bar.

"If you give up your job, Martin, I shall leave you."

Many of the compartments on the rocking corridor were curtained; Martin thought of a spy film. But there was nothing mysterious about this train: a dog's nose impressing its seal on a window, the open mouths of sleepers, children laughing or looking sick at the sway of the carriage, a suitcase inching its way to the edge of the rack. Through one window, limned against the Stanway oil flare across the Mersey sand-flats, Martin saw the scuttling skeletal legs of a fly as it fluttered with him.

"We have to talk about it. You can't write your book if you keep your job, and you'll never write it without me. I wish I didn't have to tell you this."

He strode through the restaurant car, past the gathered white curtains and the lamb chops. He was hungry, but if he could restrain himself as far as London it would be less expensive.

"You haven't got the will or the capital, and you need me to tell you that you've got the talent. But I can't and I won't. I've got to make my own way, and I shall in London. I know you'll want to live with me, but that's just second best. It should be me living with you."

Peals of Birmingham laughter came from the bar. He bought a can and poured the metallic beer into a paper cup. Beneath the Runcorn bridge the Mersey drained from sandbanks like moist indolent flesh in a clogged bath; as the train rushed through the bridge the pattern of the lattices flew silently whirring across his eyes. A fly clung trembling to the window, as if thrown out by the hectic pattern.

"I know you'll keep thinking of me and that won't help your writing. I want you to, because I love you. But I don't love insecurity."

The train flew past a hotel which seemed to have been torn in half, leaving a raw jagged wall and a space for the building's twin, and came to rest in Runcorn station. On the road across the line rain hung like web from silver lights; shadows on the drizzle ran along the platform, slamming doors. Somewhere Martin heard a buzzing.

"If you've got a job—if you've got a job—"

When the train moved out Martin ground his cup into a ball and made his way up the corridor. The diluted smoke billowed ahead of him. He reached the compartment and halted. Three men were sitting beneath his case, playing cards.

The dealer was huge, wet with rain or perspiration. His tall thin companions seized their cards and scrutinized them. As if they were messages, Martin thought—as in a spy film: messages coded through cards. There was the seed of a short story. He stood musing, but the idea slipped away. He dragged back the compartment door and entered.

The dealer looked up; his great eyes glittered like rain on mud. "How are you, friend?" he shouted. "Didn't I say someone must be joining us?" he demanded, protruding his hands from his bulging black sleeves at his friends.

"Why, a fourth," said one, his sleeves fluttering on his rapid arms like wings.

"A gift from God," the other said thickly, his head turning rustily to Martin.

"Are you going far?" the dealer demanded. "If you want to sleep, old boy, we won't disturb you. I'm sure we can find someone else who'll

join us in a good profitable game. You see, I'm being honest with you."

"You can deal me in for a round if you like," Martin said, sitting next to him but not too close. "I'm bound for London."

"Have you high hopes, old boy?"

"No," Martin said.

"It'd hardly be sporting to ask you to join us if you're not too well off. No offence, old boy. No need to be ashamed."

"I can manage," Martin said.

"Well then, let's see what poker does for us!" The dealer snatched the cards from the thin men and shuffled them; he engulfed the pack in his hands and pulled them apart, pouring the cards between them. Colours and numbers flashed at Martin, sketched faces peered. For a moment he thought the figures on the court cards were full-length and, which was odder, full-face and grinning; but in the next shuffle he saw only the familiar twinned profiles.

"One thing, though," Martin said as the dealer thrust the first card into his hand. "The deal passes in rotation, and dealer's choice."

"The Shorrocks method, eh?" the dealer laughed. "All right, old boy, dealer's choice it is. I don't think that'll upset us, do you?" he shouted, not waiting for his companions' huge eyes to glance at him and their heads to shake hastily and lethargically.

Martin fanned his cards and sorted them; two kings, two tens, an ace. "Your bet," the dealer said.

Martin rummaged in his pocket and threw sixpence on the windowsill. Outside the pane, numerous flies were crawling silently like delirium.

"My dear chap, sixpence? We can't be so timid now, can we?"

"You'll never be one of us that way," said the slow thin man, bending to the sill with half-a-crown.

"That's more like it! Two half-crowns and one for me as well! Is this your game, old boy?"

"It has to be," Martin said.

"No, no, not at all. Just as you like. We mustn't force ourselves upon you."

"Of course it's as I like," Martin said. "You're not taking me for a loser, surely? Half-a-crown and one card, please."

In exchange for the ace he received a seven. Reaching back, he turned

on the reading light. The others were not using theirs. His eye caught that of the thin man nearest the window. "You get used to this kind of light," the man blurted.

"Presumably," Martin said. "Half-a-crown."

"That's better, that's more confident. But we don't frighten, do we? See, he's twice as confident."

"And another half-crown."

"Ten shillings, old boy."

Martin examined his cards. "No," he said.

"You disappoint me, old boy. It's only confidence that sees you through this life, you know. All right, I'll see ten shillings. Seeing? Well, it looks as if my pair of queens has it. Control your face, old boy, there's no need to be so open to us."

"My deal," Martin said. "Same again."

The hands of the man by the window seemed not to belong to him; they dragged at the knees of his trousers like the hands of a hysterical child. "I could do with something to eat," he muttered.

"Just be patient," the fat man advised. "It'll be all the better for waiting."

Martin dealt himself two aces and three meaningless cards. He answered half-a-crown and redealt himself two threes and a six. The twitching thin man raised the stakes to five shillings. His companion pushed a slow hand into his pocket, reached across the restless legs and inserted ten shillings beneath the pile. The fat man followed. Martin thought for a moment. "A pound," he said.

"That's right, that's good! You'll be one of us in no time! Are we scared?"

The leaden man folded his cards together, leaned over for the pack and pushed them into place. "I'm trembling," he said.

The man by the window almost dropped his cards; they flapped and crackled like dry wings. He thrust two pounds beneath the silver and caught the pile wildly as it fell.

"You're doing well, old boy! Rid of one of us already! I think you're on your way now. Two quid."

I mustn't raise again, Martin thought. I must save some money for the next hand in case. And for London. As if the little that he had could make a difference. But he might win. "I'll see you," he said.

"You shouldn't have, old boy. Three nines, that's all I can show you. Only two pair? Bad luck, old boy. Brave try."

"I think you can deal me out now," Martin said. "I'll just adjourn for a few minutes."

"All right, old boy." As Martin reached the door the fat man called: "But you will be back, won't you? Don't make us come looking to give you your money back."

In the bar Martin leafed through his wallet and counted ten pounds. He felt he should have more, but he'd underestimated the cost of the train ticket. He could still win, though, perhaps by changing the game on his deal. Assuming the game wasn't rigged, of course. Absurd, he thought. How could the game be rigged—his brief idea of messages in the cards? Hardly; that was what came of allowing his imagination to use him rather than the reverse. The men were simply grotesques and as such fascinating, perhaps even stimulating when you knew them better. He crumpled the paper cup and left the bar. A large wet fly bounced from the window.

About to open the compartment door, he halted. The three men had laid aside their cards and were passing something between them. It must be a sort of gambler's charm—a small pale object in which points gleamed like eyes. He watched fascinated, for as they tossed it from hand to hand the motion and the dim light made it seem to struggle. The door jammed momentarily and when he glanced at the men again, they were returning their cards to the pack.

"Another game, old boy?"

"If you like."

"No, no, if you like. We mustn't stay where we're not wanted."

"Well, stay," Martin said. "We've a long way to go yet."

The man opposite stirred his legs like sticks in mud; water was trickling down his painted black hair. "That's true," he said. "And we must give you a chance."

Martin arranged his cards and automatically followed half-a-crown. He had four clubs; he threw away a diamond and took the first joker he'd seen. He gazed at his hand. "Well, don't read them," stuttered the thin man at the window, staring out at the swarming wet flies. "Play them."

"Five shillings," Martin said, thinking wistfully of his crosswords

and their anagrams, and read the cards. Ace, Ten, Nine, Eight, the joker would be King of Clubs—ATNEKC—CANT KE—but if the joker represented any letter, CANT BE—

"What's the last bid?"

"A quid. Come on, old boy, you can't leave us now!"

"Two pounds, then."

"No, I tremble again."

"Four!"

"Six!"

"Eight!" Martin cried with all the conviction he could summon.

They were seeing him. He switched on his reading light, which someone had turned off. "Ace King flush," he said.

"Two pair," the trembling man muttered in despair, drawing his knees up close to him.

"Dear, dear, that sets us back, I think. Although I'm sure there's something I could do with this joker. Why yes, old boy, I'm afraid there is. Nines over fives. Full house."

Martin dropped his cards in the thin man's shivering lap. "Sorry about that, old boy," the fat man said.

The thin man suffled, pulled at his hands as if to wrench his arms from their sockets, and held out a card to Martin. "All right," Martin said. The money was meaningless, anyway, and so was his trip to London. The man opposite was gazing at him and running his fingers down his cheekbones, drawing the flesh back from his glittering eyes.

Martin followed half-a-crown. He peered at his cards; the light behind him was dimming. Ace, Eight, Three, Two of Hearts and a joker. AT THE(K). CANT BEAT THEM.

"Let's see what you've got, old boy," the fat man shouted. "Why, you've won!"

The silver jingled into Martin's lap; cards were thrust at him. He glanced up; all their eyes glittered; the flies crawled against the grey boiling night, and the pattern on the upholstery seemed to squirm grubbily at the corner of his eye. Ten and Eight of Hearts, Ace and Nine of Diamonds, and a joker—he threw half-a-crown blindly—if he read Ace as One, THE DON—THEY DON—

"Bad luck, old boy. Never mind, the cards are yours."

Suddenly he didn't want to read the message, even though he realized

vaguely that it was the aspect of the game that gave him a sort of chance. "I'll pass the deal," he said, standing. "I'm going to drown my losses." He piled the cards on the seat and slid back the compartment door.

Perhaps all the corridor lights had fused. Perhaps the train had halted in a tunnel. Perhaps smoke had massed somehow in the corridor, for no light from the compartment penetrated the blinding darkness beyond the door. Martin's foot flinched back. He glimpsed himself snatched away and dwindling, like a fly whirled away on the wind. All at once his despair turned around in his mind, and he wanted desperately to live. He turned. Like a framed illuminated painting, the three men held out the cards to him. Behind him in the impossible darkness a dry horde swarmed rustling. He reached for the handle and panting, slammed the door.

"I thought we'd come too far for you to leave us just yet. One more game won't hurt, old boy. Will it?"

"Hurt?" said the slow man, sucking the words. "That's not the word."

"I have no money," Martin said.

The fat man laughed open-mouthed; his tongue flapped like a stranded fish. "Old boy, surely we know each other well enough by now not to think in terms of money."

Martin crushed the cards between his sticky hands, thrusting them into place like the teeth of a machine. He could feel the eyes on him. How could they glitter when the light was so dim, and how could there be so many? He glanced up, scattering the cards, and saw only the six wide eager eyes. No light flitered through the window now; the pane was alive, like a black honeycomb. **THEY DONT**— what? His mind struggled to complete the message before the cards were dealt. Suddenly he said: "Ace counts low. Low hand wins."

"I don't know about that, old boy," the fat man said, gesturing back his companions.

"Dealer's choice, remember. You agreed."

"So we did," the fat man said slowly. "And we can't break our word."

"But we always play ace high," the thin man cried, ploughing his fingernail along the base of the window.

"Be sporting, old boy."

Martin said nothing. He shook his head ambiguously and drew each of his cards into sight as if it were lethal. Eight and Ten of Spades. Seven of Diamonds. Ace of Clubs. Joker. ETSSDAC.

"No use prolonging the agony, old boy. We might as well show."

"Wait a minute," Martin gasped. "What do jokers count?"

"In your game they're not worth anything."

T USE CADS. THEY DONT USE CARDS.

"You two show," the fat man shouted. "Come on, we're nearly there!"

"Flush," stammered the man by the window. The cards sprang from his hands.

"Pair of eights," said the man opposite Martin, showing them with the lethargic movement of a melting plastic skeleton.

"Pair of twos," the fat man said and grinned. "Not doing too well that round, are we, old boy? Don't you wish you were playing straight poker?"

"Not really," Martin said. "Whether it's low or high, I have an ace."

The three heads turned. The great eyes glittered, and the mouths worked moistly. Behind them Martin saw that the gap at the top of the window was black and blocked by a mass which crawled. The fat man gripped Martin's knee hotly and levered himself to his feet. The three of them stood over Martin. At once the lights went out, and shapes bumped softly against him.

They've cheated, he thought in bitter desperation. So does everyone. Wind whipped rain from the windows; the train rushed on, and a buzzing form buffeted him hugely. Struggling, he was twisted about and came face to face with the dark intensely fearful oval of his head in the compartment mirror. Then he saw more, and began to struggle frantically as his unseen captors enclosed him.

Someone had opened the window wide; black rain streaked in, and the train curved and gathered speed toward a tunnel. The tunnel's lips worked. Their outlines crawled minutely and changed, and black spittle flew from them only to return and crawl. Somehow, as the train shouted as it plunged into the tunnel, what lay ahead was displayed in the mirror for him. At the end of the tunnel as if far down a telescope he saw a station like a black ship, sinking beneath swarming clouds of blackness.

A shock thrilled through him, and he managed to throw off his captors for a moment. It was as if the train were moving in two directions simultaneously: the forward rush he felt and the impossible opposite direction in the mirror. It challenged all sanity. And yet they must give him a chance, they couldn't break their words; his mind was still alive and determined to live. "I'm not letting you win!" he shouted and threw himself toward the door, through darkness that buzzed furiously. He had grasped the handle when the first lights of Crewe station blazed into the empty compartment.

Or almost empty, for his feet weren't free. He glared down and saw that they were buried in a mound of silver and notes. He kicked. Then he stooped and began to gather the money. From beneath it crawled three weak flies, which he crushed. He pulled down his case and threw the money in, crumpling it, throwing in the silver from the other side of the compartment, laughing. Suddenly he flung in the rest and closing the case, strode out onto the platform. He ran through the dim brown light, past waiting figures like forgotten waxworks, toward the platform for Liverpool. Somewhere he heard a buzzing.

Out of the Ages

LIN CARTER

(Note from the Assistant Curator of Manuscripts, Sanbourne Institute: The following manuscript was found in the desk of Dr. H. Stephenson Blaine and would seem to be pages from a diary or journal he was keeping prior to his unfortunate collapse. As the material has some apparent bearing on the deterioration of his health in the months before his nervous breakdown, I have taken the liberty of sending a copy to the physician in charge of Dr. Blaine.)

—Arthur Wilcox Hodgkins

AS CURATOR of the Manuscript Collection at the Sanbourne Institute of Pacific Antiquities in Santiago, California, it was my duty to conduct a general inventory of the Copeland Bequest, awarded the Institute by the Estate of the late Professor Harold Hadley Copeland in 1928, two years after his lamentable demise in a mental institution in San Francisco.

The Bequest consisted of several trunks filled with miscellaneous papers, together with at least one book-length unpublished manuscript, and a modest but highly selective group of artifacts from the Professor's own collection. I examined the artifacts first, as the Directors were most anxious to exhibit the Copeland Collection during the 1928 season.

With mingled emotions, I opened the packing case containing the artifacts collection. Beyond mere curiosity as to what I should find therein, my predominant feelings were those of regretful respect. The Professor had been twice my own age, and I had never known him on a personal level, but no scientist can work in any area of the prehistory,

archeology, myth-patterns or folklore of the Pacific islanders for long, without encountering the work of Harold Hadley Copeland. His is undoubtedly the most distinguished name in the young field of the study of Pacific antiquities, and such has been the case ever since the first publication of his monumental book, *Prehistory in the Pacific: A Preliminary Investigation with Reference to the Myth-Patterns of Southeast Asia* (1902), a book which remains the classic of its field and which has proved a source of inspiration to at least two generations of scientists, including myself. And there is much that is admirable, even brilliant, in his *Polynesian Mythology, with a Note on the Cthulhu Legend-Cycle* (1906), although, as I have since written elsewhere, "it reflects his unfortunate and growing enthusiasm for questionable occult theories, which led to the erosion of his scholarly reputation and is perhaps indicative of the mental aberration which dominated his declining years," to which I added that it "remains to this day a massive work of scientific research."

From that high-water mark, however, the Professor rapidly declined. His unfortunate mania centered about a bygone Pacific civilization of extreme antiquity, of which the mysterious stone images on Easter Island and the megalithic ruined cities of Ponape are mere vestiges. From what little I then knew of his mania, it focused upon certain patterns of myth found commonly throughout Micronesia and most of the more populous Pacific islands, which concerned a numerous pantheon of gods or devils or evil spirits of extraterrestrial origin who came down to this world in remote ages and dominated the planet in the pre-Pleistocene.

In particular, he was interested in those deities who had their dominion over his beloved ancient Pacific. Native legends described them as completely non-human, unlike even the beasts, and as generally aquatic in nature. They had fought some sort of war with another group of cosmic gods from the stars, had been defeated, and, in some manner, thrown either into exile or into trance-like slumber, from which at some unknown future date they would awake, arise, and attempt the conquest of the earth again. A ludicrous myth, surely, although with a surprising sophistication to it; not at all the sort of thing one would expect from the imagination of primitive islanders.

With Professor Copeland's third major text, alas, it became obvious that his obsession had assumed the overwhelming proportions of a

mania. Still, there is much that can be admired in that book, *The Pre-historic Pacific in the Light of the 'Ponape Scripture,'* (1911), and it is a monumental work of sheer scholarship. Two years following publication of this book, he led an expedition into the depths of Asia, and in 1916 he published, in a privately-printed brochure, his "conjectural translation" of the ancient stone tablets he had found in the tomb of a prehistoric Central Asian shaman. The shocking and blasphemous nature of his *Zanthu Tablets* led to official suppression; the Professor himself was asked to resign from the archeological association of which he had been co-founder and past president. His decline from that point on was rapid.

Unpacking the artifacts, I found a typed list in a file folder, which described and attempted to date them. I reproduce it here.

1) Tapa-cloth, Tonga Islands, *circa* 1897. Note 5-pointed star motif. (Eld. Sign?)

2) "Fisherman's god" image, Cook Islanders, about 1900. Native name: *Zatamaga*. (? *Zatamagwa*—ref. #7)

3) Sepik River Valley figure, New Guinea, date unk. but after 1895. Note cone-shaped torso, suggestion of tentacles, mane-like hair.

4) Carven shell pendant, Papua. 1902? Octopoidal head.

5) Carven stone door-jamb or *talé*, New Caledonia, *circa* 1892. Note 5-pointed star motif *in conjunction* with serpent-maned head—native name "Hommogah."

6) Bushy-maned and bearded wooden mask, Ambrym origin, New Hebrides, date unk. Note suggestion of *tentacles*, not hair: "Medusa" motif observed in Carolines, New Guinea (Sepik R. area), also Marquesas.

7) Stone *tiki*, Marquesas, about 1904, but motif common in prev. generations, says Tillinghast. Note snaky hair, pyramidal body. Native name: "*Z'otomogo*," or "*Zatamagwa*."

8) Carven lintel, New Zealand, *very old* Maori, (bef. 1800?) Cone or pyramid body, surmounted by wavy-maned head. Note "Medusa" motif, as in #6. Old shaman called it "Sothamogha."

9) Basalt image, Easter Island, undatable. No similarity to giant *aku aku* heads found on outer slopes of Rano-raraku; natives call it "god of ocean deeps" (Cthulhu? Zoth-Ommog?)

10) Frag. lavastone bas-relief, S. Indo-China, perhaps Khmer? Used

as idol for degenerate native cult in Singapore, *circa* 1902-1905. Cult-name "Z'mog" attached to central fig.; note serpentine hair motif.

11) Devil-mask, Sepik Riv. area, N. Guinea. Non-human, octopoid head, pyramid or cone body, tentacular arms. Missionaries in area report fighting native cult for 50 years; Rev. H. Wallace says native god named "Zhmog-yaa."

As for the artifacts on this list, described in the notes, they were for the most part excellent examples of South or Central Pacific native workmanship. Design-motifs, however, were quite unusual and suggested sources in Pacific myth and legend unfamiliar to me. But there was nothing about the stone images and carvings, the wooden masks or woven cloth samples, that seemed particularly bizarre or frightening . . . except that, taken together in this proximity, they suggested a surprising and even disconcerting similarity of theme and design, which became all the more enigmatic when you consider the enormous distances involved.

That is to say, there is nothing really uncanny about a lavastone bas-relief fragment such as #10, which, if the Professor is correct in assigning Khymer origin, must come from the jungles of Cambodia; nor is there anything frightful or unnatural about the stone *tiki*, #7 on the Professor's list, which is clearly of Marquesan craftsmanship.

What *is* a trifle disturbing, however is to examine them in the light of *distance* . . . for there are more than *eight thousand miles of ocean* between the Marquesas and Cambodia . . . and it seemed perplexing, if not virtually inconceivable, that two so widely separated cultures could have carven images of a snaky-maned divinity with names so amazingly similar as *Z'otomogo* and *Z'mog*.

As for the twelfth item on the inventory—that was much more surprising than all the rest put together. The Professor's notation read as follows:

12) Jade image, workmanship unidentified; disc. by native diver off Ponape, 1909. Note inscription on base (*not* Naacal—Tsath-yo or R'lyehian?) *Definitely represents Zoth-Ommog!*

This particular artifact arrested my attention almost immediately. Indeed, among the jumble of carved and painted wood and crudely-cut stonework, it stood out dramatically. As the "Ponape figurine" has never

been photographed or displayed, I shall describe it in some detail, for it is most remarkable.

In the first place, it is an extraordinary rarity to find worked jade articles of such size among native Pacific artworks—unless they be mere trade craft exports from China, such being commonly found. But this particular image or idol was certainly not of Chinese workmanship . . . indeed, both from style and technique, to say nothing of craftsmanship, it is completely unique.

Briefly, the figurine, including base, stands about nineteen inches and is of worked and polished jade of an unfamiliar type. I am no authority on Chinese jade carvings, but I have never seen this sort of jade before anywhere. It is greasy grey-white, flecked or mottled with irregular spots of deep dark green, and both extremely dense and heavy. The image itself is not only non-humanoid, but virtually non-objective—hauntingly suggestive of some of the weird carved figures of the little-known amateur sculptor, Clark Ashton Smith—and in detail and finish, to say nothing of conception and sophistication, weirdly reminiscent of the brilliant if degenerate work produced by the famed San Francisco sculptor, Cyprian Sincaul.

It represents a peculiar creature with a body shaped like a broad-based, truncated cone. A flat, blunt, wedge-shaped, vaguely reptilian head surmounts this conical torso, and the head is almost entirely hidden behind swirling tresses. This hair, or beard and mane, consist of thickly-carved and coiling ropes, like serpents or worms, and the workmanship is so uncannily naturalistic that you could almost *swear* the slithering tendrils are in motion. Through this repulsive Medusa-mane of ropy tendrils, two fierce, serpent-like eyes glare in a horrible mingling of both cold, inhuman mockery . . . and what I can only describe as *gloating menace*.

The technique of the unknown sculptor is one of astonishing sophistication: there is no slightest hint of the primitive about this puzzling and vaguely repellent figurine. It must have taken exceptional talent, virtual genius, to catch that expression of leering, icy, alien menace in the stubborn medium of slick, heavy jade. But catch it the artist has . . . to an almost disquieting degree.

The base upon which this truncated, conical body rests is carved from the same unfamiliar speckled jade, and it is oddly-angled, as if the sculptor's culture possessed a completely non-Euclidian geometry.

Deeply and cleanly cut in one side of this odd-angled base are two exceedingly complex hieroglyphs in a language unknown to me, symbols which bear no similarity to either Chinese ideographs, Egyptian glyphs, Arabic characters, Sanskrit, or even common forms of Mesopotamian cuneiform, and certainly no slightest resemblance to any Southern or Central Pacific native writing known to me.

Rising from overlapping folds at the base of the image's neck, four bluntly-tapering limbs or appendages rise from the torso. They are flat and resemble the arms of the common echinoderm of the class *asteroidea*—the familiar starfish of our California beaches—with the rather peculiar exception that the underside of these broad, flat, narrowing limbs bear row upon row of disc-like suckers. Remarkable how the unknown artist has combined suggestions of starfish and squid or octopi in his central conception . . . and extraordinary, the cold sensation of unease amounting to a sort of psychic warning of *actual physical danger* I receive from the briefest contemplation of this idol! The combination of that fixed, gloating stare from those soulless, snake-like eyes half-veiled behind the coiling, worm-like tangle of its hair . . . and those weird, bending arms or tentacles, half-raised and half-extended as . . . as if to clutch their prey! . . . well, it is quite unsettling.

Putting aside the jade figurine, I next turned to a cursory perusal of the miscellaneous manuscripts. I first leafed through the manila folder which had been inserted in the packing-case which had contained the artifact collection, and whose first page consisted of the annotated listing of the collection.

Leafing rapidly through the bulky folder, I discovered its contents to be heterogeneous indeed, consisting of some personal letters from Professor Copeland to various institutions such as the Curator of Rare Books at the British Museum, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, universities and libraries here in the United States; there were also bundles of clippings from a wide range of newspapers (generally having nothing in common, outside of the fact that they concerned missing or sunken ships in the Pacific, or news accounts of the temporary emergence of sunken islands of volcanic nature), and several pages of notes clipped together and bearing the heading "*Notes on the Xothic Legend-Cycle, with References to the R'lyeh Text and Other Books.*"

The first page consisted of a list, in phonetic spelling, of the variant

names of the aquatic deity whose representations in the plastic arts the Professor had collected so assiduously. As noted earlier, it was most surprising that cultures so widely scattered should share a divinity in common, or at least the very similar names the Professor had noted down—"Zatamaga," "Hommogah," "Z'otomogo," "Sothamogha," "Z'mog," and so on—were so similar as to strongly suggest a common religious figure shared by obscure cults across the breadth of the Pacific.

The Professor had next tabulated the physical elements of this being as shown in the various artworks. In summation, they tallied in amazing detail with the appearance of the jade figurine I had set aside atop my filing cabinet.

Next he had carefully traced the two complicated hieroglyphs onto a sheet of note-paper, and underneath these followed a list of the phonemes contained in the composite name to which he had attached symbols from several languages I was not familiar with. These symbols were arranged in neat columns, and the columns were headed with odd, uncouth labels—which, from context, must be the names of languages, but if so, they are of languages unlisted in Havering's *Alphabets of the World, Ancient and Modern*—"Naacal" "Hieratic Naacal"—"Tsath-yo"—"R'lyehian"—"Senzar"—"Conjectural Aklo"—and others, several of them, not one of which was known to me. His purpose here was clear: he was attempting to find the phonetic meaning of the two Ponape figurine glyphs by comparison with similar phonemes in presumably culturally-related tongues. The file folder bore no evidence of success in this endeavor.

Next followed a sequence of letters to and from officials at various institutions. The Professor was attempting to obtain certain obscure books, obviously of considerable rarity, either on library loan or in copy. I reproduce a specimen of this correspondence at random below:

MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Arkham, Massachusetts

Office of the Librarian

September 3rd, 1907

Dear Professor:

We are in receipt of your letter of August 29th, requesting information on the availability of the *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred on inter-library loan.

The Librarian begs me to inform you that the Kester Library is correct in its information. We have indeed a copy, in excellent state, of the Latin translation made by Olaus Wormius in the edition published in Spain in the Seventeenth Century, and to our knowledge this is the only copy of the "complete" *Necronomicon* (i.e., the Spanish edition of Wormius) at present in this country. Only five copies, in fact, are known to exist in the entire world.

The extreme rarity of this volume is such that the University Board of Regents has strictly forbidden us to circulate our Alhazred on inter-library loan, although it is available for personal examination to qualified scholars within the premises of the Library itself.

Since you are at present located in California, and a trip to Massachusetts might be difficult to one of your busy schedule, the Librarian suggests you contact Dr. Foster at the Huntington Library in your own state. I believe the Huntington possesses a *Necronomicon* in manuscript copy, but cannot be certain.

Yours most sincerely,
Thaddeus Pressley, Jun.
For the Librarian

After this came a series of notations in Professor Copeland's own hand, which appear to be a summary of correspondence missing from this file:

"Sept. 17th. contacted Huntington but they have no *Nec*. Suggest Brit. Mus. Huntington has *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, however, in 1840 Düsseldorf edition, so may be worth a trip after all, since von Junzt has much data on Mu, and I suspect Z-O may turn out to be Muvian.

"Oct. 11. Obtained good copies of relevant passages from *Nec*. courtesy of Wallingford in London, but must be from incomplete 15th Century black-letter edition done in Germany—same edition Kester Lib. in Salem has. *Must* have *Nec* passages concerning Xothic data in complete form!

"Oct. 20. Writing today to Lib. Univ. Buenos Aires, Lib. of Univ. of Lima, Peru, and Bib. Nat. in Paris. Spanish edition

reputedly in Buenos Aires and Paris; while Lima supposed to have the Italian edition of Theodorus Philetas' Greek trans."

These entries were followed by long passages in several different handwritings, of odd, rhythmic, seemingly mythological narratives. They are far too lengthy and obscure for me to bother copying them into this record, but as Copeland obviously found something important missing from certain of them—something which other copyists had eventually supplied—I will jot down the shortest of these, as follows:

"*Necronomicon*, Bk. II, Chap. vii (excerpt): 'And it was done then as it had been promised aforetime, that He (*i.e.* *Cthulhu*) was taken by Those whom He had defied, and was plunged into the nethermost depths beneath the Sea, and They placed Him within the barnacled Tower that is said to rise amidst the great ruin that is the Sunken City (*R'lyeh*), and He was sealed within by the Elder Sign; and, raging at Those who had imprisoned Him, He further earned Their wrath, and They, descending upon Him for the second time, didst impose upon Him the semblance of Death, but left Him dreaming there beneath the Great Waters, and returned to that place from whence They had come, which is named Glyu-Vho, or Ibt al Janzah as we would say (*i.e.*, *name Arabic astronomers of Albazred's day used for the star we call Betelgeuse*), and which is amongst the stars, the which looketh upon Earth from that season when the leaves fall to that season when the sowers-of-the-soil are accustomed once again to their fields. And there shall He lie dreaming forever in his His House at R'lyeh, unto which withouten pause they who served Him swam, and didst strive against every obstacle, but then disposed themselves to await His Awakening, for that they had no power against the Elder Sign and were fearful of its great potency; but they knew that the Cycle returneth, and that He shall be freed to seize upon the Earth again and make it His Kingdom, and to thus defy the Elder Gods once more. And to His Brethren it chanced likewise, that They were taken by Those whom They too had defied and were hurled into banishment; Him Who Is Not To Be Named (*i.e.*, *Hastur*) was thrust into the Outermost Emptyness that is beyond the Stars, and with the Others it was the same, until at last was the Earth free of Them, and Those who had come hither in the form of Towers of Flame returned whence They had come, and were seen on this World

no more, and on all of the Earth peace came and was unbroken, yet ever the Minions of the Old Ones gathered and planned and sought ways whereby to free their Masters, and lingered whilst Men came to search into the Secret and Forbidden Places and fumble at the Gates. (*Note: German edition text ends here and goes on to passage beg. 'But it shall not be always thus'; whereas Spanish text continues with following portion omitted in black-letter edition.*) And thus He slept unbroken ages by, whilst in the Dark City (*i.e., Carcosa*), against whose dim shores the cloud-waves break, Him Who Is Not To Be Named roared and writhed in His fetters, and in black, lightless N'kai, deep within the secret places that gape and yawn beneath the Earth, the Black Thing (*prob. Tsathoggua*) lay enchained and Abhoth too, the Unclean One, even as didst They all, nor was it within Their power to free Themselves from the strictures imposed upon Them by the Lords of Glyu-Vho (*the 'Elder Gods'*), aye, and thus while aeons lapse Ythogtha howls ever from His Abyss, and Ghatanothoa from His Mount, and Zoth-Ommog from His Deep, which is under the Great Waters off the Isle of the Sacred Stone Cities (*?Ybe*), and all Their Brethren, helpless as are They to free Themselves, and hungry for that freedom to which in the passing of ages They shall attain. In the meanwhile They lurk ever just beyond the threshold which They cannot pass, and hideous beyond the comprehension of mortal minds is the Vengeance that fills Their troubled dreams. CHAP. VIII. But it shall not be always thus, for it is written that the Cycle shall in time return in its appointed Round . . ."

As I find that mythological mumbo-jumbo interminable, I shall let this single sample suffice, it being the briefest of them all. From the context and appearance of the documents, I gather that the Professor found a friendly colleague willing to copy the passages he desired from a copy of this book, the *Necronomicon*, most likely at the Bibliothèque Nationale, from the Paris letterhead on the notepaper used. This scholarly friend would seem to have been familiar with this curious mythology for his parenthetical interpolations indicate a close familiarity with the symbolism used.

It was apparent to me that it would be the labor of many days sorting through this mélange, so I set the folder aside for the remainder of the

afternoon, and bent my attention to the other duties which awaited me. Ever and anon, however, I had the distinct feeling of *eyes upon the back of my neck*—a distinctly uncomfortable sensation, doubly so as there was no other person in the room with me at the time.

Finishing work early, I went home that night to my lodgings in Curwen Street in a strange mood of depression and vague unease—although why I should feel depressed or uneasy I cannot say, unless it was from thinking of Professor Copeland's unhappy fate. He spent the last eight years of his life in a madhouse, and died screaming of things coming down from the stars to wipe all earth clean of life in order to house their own hellish spawn . . .

In bed I somehow could not keep my mind on the book I was reading—I am lamentably addicted to "thrillers," and was halfway through a novel by one Richard Marsh called *The Beetle*, which I had been devouring with relish. Unable to fix my attention on the page, I took from my briefcase the manila file folder from the Copeland Papers which contained the data on the "Xothic Legend-Cycle," and turned again to perusing the documents, having brought both folder and jade figurine home with me for further study.

There was page after page of mythological material laboriously hand-copied from books with the most strange and unwholesome titles imaginable—the Comte d'Erlette's *Cultes des Goules*, Ludvig Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis*, something called the *Pnakotic Manuscript*, the *Ponape Scripture*, von Junzt's *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, many more pages copied from the *Necronomicon*, some typed material from Wyndham's *Tangaroa, and Other Pacific Myths*, the *R'lyeh Text*, and some material which appeared to be from a dissertation or unpublished manuscript by one Dr. Laban Shrewsbury of Miskatonic, of whom I had heard vaguely.

As for the copied material itself, I could make no sense out of it—more confused and chaotic mystical nonsense had never spewed from a deranged intellect! What is one to make of incoherent ravings about gods or devils with such unpronounceable names as Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth, Ghatanothoa, Lloigor, Y'golonak, Shub-Niggurath, Hastur, Idh-yaa, Ythogtha, Azathoth, Ithaqua, Glaaki, Tsathoggua, Iod, Yig, Gol-goroth, Nyarlathotep, Ubbo-Sathla, and so on?

In the main, the Professor seemed to have attempted to isolate in

one place all the scattered references to *four* of these demons or divinities from the full range of this immense literature. The beings in which he was interested were Cthulhu, Ghatanothoa, Ythogtha, and Zoth-Ommog; to a lesser extent he was also gathering references to Yig, Shub-Niggurath, Vorvados, Yeb and Nug. I gathered from some of the material through which I leafed rapidly, that these various beings were known to obscure cults scattered all over the world—there were references to “black Zimbabwe” and “weed-grown Y’ha-nthlei,” to the Plateau of Leng somewhere in Asia, to certain ancient ruins in Yucatan and Peru, to a certain region in the unexplored deserts of Australia, to a primordial city of “the Yuggoth-spawn” in Antarctica—of all places!— and to the myths of the Wendigo, or Wind-Walker, common among the North Pacific Indian tribes of Canada and Alaska, to the Tcho-Tcho people of Burma, to the “Abominable Mi-Go,” which I assume from the context refers to the so-called Abominable Snow-Men of the Himalayas, to “Fabulous Irem, City of Pillars,” which I recalled from my boyish reading of the *Arabian Nights* and the *Rubaiyat*, and which thus doubtless belongs to Islamic legendry.

But the members of the “Great Old Ones,” (as the devil-beings from the stars were most commonly called), upon which Copeland had fixed his attention, were those gods of primal and legended Mu, and in particular, some sort of trinity composed of Ghatanothoa, Ythogtha, and Zoth-Ommog. These beings were supposed to be brothers, and had for their sire that same Cthulhu of whom I had seen such frequent mention in these excerpts from the literature. One quotation in particular seemed central and pertinent; it came from a remarkable manuscript which, according to Copeland’s notes, had been inscribed “in the Elder Aeon,” on some sort of palmleaf-parchment, and which had been discovered during diggings on Ponape about 1734 by a Yankee trader, one Captain Abner Ezekiel Hoag of Arkham, Mass. Hoag’s body-servant, obviously a half-breed Polynesian or Oriental (Copeland calls him a “hybrid human/Deep One”—whatever that means!) translated this ancient book-scroll from “the primal Naacal” and it was circulated secretly to certain cultists and occult students in the United States, Europe and Asia for many years. Eventually both the original parchment and a copy of the translation somehow got into the Kester Library, from which the Professor obtained his texts.

At any rate, the key quotation came from this so-called *Ponape Scripture*, which I will copy here:

"As for Ghatanothoa, the Thing on the Mount, He and His Brethren, Ythogtha, the Abomination in the Abyss, and Zoth-Ommog, the Dweller in the Deep, are the Sons of the mighty Cthulhu, Lord of the Watery Abyss and dread and awful Potentate of drowned R'lyeh; and, like unto Their Terrible Sire, Who yet shall come again in future time, They have Their Dominion over the great fish and the serpents of the Deeps, and They too be sealed away under the terrific spell of the Elder Sign for that They dared to challenge Them From Glyu-Vho for the domain of the Earth. Sons be They to great Cthulhu and His Spouse, Idh-yaa, with Whom He copulated awesomely in the nightmare darkneses between the Stars, and these Three, the Spawn of Cthulhu, came down from remote and ultra-telluric Xoth, the dim green double sun that glitters like a daemonic eye in the blackneses beyond Abbith, to whelm and reign over the steaming fens and bubbling slime-pits of the mist-veiled aeons of this Earth, and it was in primordial and shadowy Mu that They were great."

I set the folder aside as weariness began to creep over me.

That night I did not have wholesome dreams.

In a desultory fashion, over the next three months or so, I worked my way through the various notes and documents. One by one the pieces in this puzzle began to fall into place.

This Demon Trinity, and its dread Sire, interested Copeland most because the Pacific was the area of their greatest power; obviously, in his explorations, researches and excavations, he had come across this cult or its remains, which had led him on and on through the mazes of this weird and horrible mythology.

As for the name wherewith he had labelled the cult-material, the derivation was obvious. "Xothic," because the legends centered around three devil gods engendered by Cthulhu upon an entity who dwelt upon or near the double star the cultists knew as Xoth. Ghatanothoa and Ythogtha and Zoth-Ommog, and perhaps Cthulhu and his monstrous mate, Idh-yaa, as well, had come down from space to this world in the dawn ages and their empire had covered that primal Pacific civilization known to the occultists as Mu. When Mu broke up and sub-

merged—oh, I have dipped into the wild pages of Colonel Churchward, too!—their worship and their legend lingered on among certain degenerate cult-survivals of the most staggering antiquity.

It was to the task of chronicling this dread, prehistoric empire (which reputable scientists, needless to say, shrug off as mere legend-mongering), that Copeland had devoted the labor of his final years. For among the miscellaneous papers of the Bequest was a vast, untidy bundle of manuscript, in length the size of a weighty tome, which thankfully was left still unfinished at the Professor's death. I say "thankfully left unfinished" because I have—to the detriment of my wholesome slumber—dared to glance into the chaotic pages of screaming lunacy which comprise this monumental work—the spewings of a mad brain—the ravings of a once-brilliant intellect gone teetering over the brink of cataclysmic insanity.

Few eyes, I think, save my own, have ever peered into this final production of his blighted career. But this work, to which the Professor affixed the title of *The Civilization of Mu, a Reconstruction in the Light of Recent Discoveries, with A Synoptic Comparison of the 'R'lyeh Text' and the 'Ponape Scripture'*—this manuscript (I say), for all that it is an incoherent jumble of hideous blasphemy and nightmarish cosmic speculations, yet traces the rise and decay of a civilization which, however imaginary and even mythical, does at least provide a viable hypothesis to account for the puzzling and cyclopean masonry wherewith so many of the jungled Pacific isles are mysteriously littered.

The collapse of this prehuman race, and the destruction of the Lost Continent that some conjecture to have been its cradle, was (in Copeland's view) survived by the decadent worship of these Xothic demon gods.

And this puzzling survival, his documents reiterate, was because the Demon Trinity and their Sire had not died at all, indeed, could not die or be slain, but lived on forever under the trance imposed upon them by the Elder Gods, their supernal adversaries. *But in dreams they could sway and infect the minds of men.* And susceptible men could be perverted to their worship—like Faust, tempted by the promised secrets of black magic. But why did the sleeping gods *need* human converts? The answer came to me in a flash: it was suggested in that first interminable quotation from the blasphemous and shocking *Necronomicon* which I

have already copied in this journal: "Yet ever the Minions of the Old Ones gathered and planned and sought ways whereby to free their Masters, and lingered whilst Men came to search into the Secret and Forbidden Places *and fumble at the Gates.*"

I understood it at once—the Elder Sign, whatever it was, was a material thing, some sort of talisman or sigil, imbued with psychic force which repelled both the Old Ones and their unhuman Minions—but *did not repulse men*. It was men and men alone who could open the "Gates" and set the Old Ones free!

Very much of Copeland's research had been geographical, trying to pin down the location of the imprisoned Old Ones in the Pacific area. There was quite a sheaf of newspaper clippings—inexplicable to me when first I leafed through them, though now they took on an ominous and sinister meaning.

These clippings were fastened together with a paperclip in three bundles, tagged "R'lyeh," "Yhe," and "Z-O; Ponape." The bundle marked "R'lyeh" was by far the bulkiest, and must have contained thirty or more news items, going back as far as 1879. The most recent clipping was from the *Sydney Bulletin* for April 18, 1925. Under the headline *Mystery Derelict Found at Sea* were details of a confused and seemingly innocuous maritime tragedy concerning a two-masted schooner, the *Emma*, which sailed into the unknown from Auckland on February 20th, three years earlier; on the twelfth day of the following month, a lone survivor was rescued from the waves by the Morrison Company freighter *Vigilant*. This man, a Norwegian named Gustaf Johansen, told of encountering a ship manned by villainous Kanakas and half-castes, of a battle at sea, followed by the discovery of an unknown island not found on any chart. To this yellowed newspaper clipping was attached some typewritten papers—the text of a sort of diary by the sailor Johansen—obtained, surprisingly enough, by the grand-nephew of one of my old teachers, George Gammell Angell, Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages at Brown University; both Gammell and his grand-nephew had, it seemed, interested themselves in much the same sort of borderline studies as had formed Professor Copeland's chief preoccupation. I shall not go into the text of the Johansen narrative in any length—he describes their sighting of the

unmapped island at about S. Latitude $47^{\circ} 9'$, W. Longitude $126^{\circ} 43'$ —their landing on a coastline of mingled mud, ooze and weed-grown blocks of enormous stone masonry—a confused and nightmarish struggle with enormous things he shudderingly refuses to describe.

This reference to latitude and longitude Copeland underscored heavily with his fountain pen.

Turning back to the earliest clipping, a yellowed scrap of newsprint from the *Boston Register*, dated November 15th, 1879, I read that certain articles from a prehistoric tomb were to be on public display in the Cabot Museum, Boston; these articles had been found on May 11th, 1878, by crewmen from the freighter *Eridanus*, bound from Wellington, New Zealand, to Valparaiso, Chile, which had sighted "a new island unmarked on any chart and evidently of volcanic origin." The newspaper article gave latitude and longitude readings identical with those the *Sydney Bulletin* printed in its story about the schooner *Emma*—forty-seven years later!

The second bundle of news-clippings, only half as thick as the first, contained much similar material, but located infrequent emergences from the deeps of an island containing a great chasm some thousands of miles to the south of the "R'lyeh emergences."

It was the third bundle, however, which caught my attention the most. These clippings, about a dozen in all, were about odd disappearances of sailing ships in the waters off Ponape. The earliest of these told of the disappearance at sea of the whaling ship *Nebuchadnezzar*, out of New Bedford, which vanished in the vicinity of Ponape with all hands in 1864. No storm was reported in the vicinity of Ponape—no storm anywhere in the Pacific on the date in question for a thousand miles—*nothing but a peculiar, heavy, low-lying bank of fog*.

A more recent clipping, from the *Singapore Times* for April 8th 1911, discussed the mysterious disappearance with all hands of the French warship *Versailles*; again, no storm was reported, but heavy fog overlay the waters off Ponape.

One clipping in particular the Professor had marked with a large exclamation-point. It came from the *Honolulu Sentinel* for June 17th, 1922, and told a nightmarish and rambling story of a fleet of fishing boats manned by Ponape natives caught in a thick fog off the island and attacked by *monstrous and horrible sea-slugs, swollen to fantastic*

proportions, which slithered into the boats in some cases, catching the native fishermen in their mouths and dragging them over side. More than forty unfortunates were lost in this manner, and the survivors, who were hospitalized in states ranging from incoherent raving hysteria to complete catatonic shock, repeated over and over again the meaningless word or exclamation "Hug!" or "Ugh!"

In the margin of this story, in Copeland's hand, was written: "YUGGYA! See *Zan. Tab.*, IX, 2, lines 120-150." This note referred to the puzzling and cryptic set of inscribed tablets Professor Copeland had brought back from the prehistoric stone tomb of a priest or wizard in the Tsang Plateau region of Central Asia in 1913. I recalled that the publication in 1916 of his brochure *The Zanthu Tablets: A Conjectural Translation*, with its unholy and repulsive picture of the dawn age of civilization, had been thunderously condemned as "cosmic blasphemy" from press and pulpit, and had given the death-blow to his scientific reputation. Two years later he was committed to a madhouse; eight years after, he died raving.

We had a copy of the *Zanthu Tablets* in our library section, although I had never dared look within its innocuous green leatherette cover; I did so now, however, and quickly found the passage to which the handwritten note refers. It is close to the end of the ninth tablet—there are ten in all—and the relevant passage must be that in which the hierophant Zanthu invokes "the Father of Worms . . . even undying and putrescent Ubb, leader and progenitor of the dreaded Yuggya—the Burrowers Beneath—the loathly and prehuman servitors of (Ythogtha), who squirm and slither in the slime about His feet."

But the central passage reads thusly: "The Yuggya serve my lord Ythogtha and His Brother, Zoth-Ommog, even as the Deep Ones serve Cthulhu and the Tcho-Tchos their lords, Zhar and Lloigor; and as the Flame-Creatures strive ever to free Cthugha and the Serpentmen of Valusia sought to unchain their lord, Yig, so do the Yuggya tirelessly gnaw at the bonds that hold Ythogtha and Zoth-Ommog."

This reminded me of something in one of those lengthy and chaotic passages from the *Necronomicon*; I turned to those manuscripts and found the quotation—"Within the five-pointed Star carven of grey stone from ancient Mnar lies armor against witches and daemons, against the Deep Ones, the Dholes, *the Yuggs*, the Voormis, the Tcho-

Tcho, the Abominable Mi-Go, the Shoggoths, the Valusians, and all such people and being who serve the Great Old Ones and their Spawn . . .”

I put away the Copeland papers with a little shudder of disgust. The fascination this repulsive and chaotic mythology had begun to exert on my imagination was distinctly unhealthy: I had been sleeping badly these past several nights, and my dreams—nightmares really—I, who have not had nightmares since I was an adolescent!—my dreams, (which never, upon waking, could I remember in any detail, save that they were *frightful*) were filled with shadowy terrors that left me weak and shaken at dawn. It was time I forgot about poor mad Copeland and his horror-gods and their slithering horde of worm-like worshippers, and turned my mind to sane and sunlit matters.

Shoving the papers away with a determined gesture, I reached for my pipe . . . and found myself staring directly into the carved glare of gloating, icy menace some unknown genius had sculpted in that weirdly horrible idol from Zoth-Ommog’s waters . . .

(Note by Arthur Wilcox Hodgkins: Up to this point Dr. Blaine’s manuscript is neatly written, on consecutively-numbered sheets of office stationery, and develops a chronological narrative that is logical and coherent, although it betrays a level of emotional uneasiness just below the narrative surface. However, at this point the neat, logical portion of the manuscript ends abruptly, and the hastily scrawled and clumsily scribbled pages which follow are in no particular order, and describe the rapid and frightful degeneration of his mind towards a final, shattering climax of mad ravings. I have attempted to sort the following fragments into some sort of order, based on internal evidence, but without much success.)

(DREAM ONE)

Extraordinary and terrifying dream tonight—first one I can remember clearly enough to set down. Dim, moonlit vistas of stone city of Cyclopean architecture—titanic stone blocks graven with sprawling and monstrously uncouth glyphs—rows of immense pylons marching the length of flagstone-paven squares—ziggurats or angular pyramids with smoky flames at summits, like altar fires.

Hooded and robed shapes about the upmost tiers of one colossal

pyramid, and the sound of rhythmic chanting—over and over, the same inexplicable phrase—woke suddenly, dripping with cold sweat, with the irresistible urge to write down what I had heard (which is why I am describing the dream). Probably utterly meaningless, but here goes—

The phrase is "*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.*"

(DREAM TWO?)

Tonight I returned again in my dreams to the Cyclopean stone city of monstrous angular pyramids and tall pylons, and to the vision of queer, squat, robed and hooded celebrants worshipping at some awful Rite . . . the Moon seized my attention . . . it was frightfully huge, and its shining face oddly unmarked by the many craters which pockmark its visage in our day . . . it made me wonder (in my dream) if this was a vision of some remote, pre-Cambrian era—just then a horrible flying Thing flashed across the silver face of the full Moon—ribbed, membranous wings and hideously-elongated beak or proboscis—*surely a living pteranodon of the remote Pleistocene skies!*

(PERHAPS DREAM 3 OR 4)

—I am in an immense building of monolithic stone, the blocks perhaps sixty or seventy feet on a side . . . it is a colossal hall, lined with monstrous huge columns, like the hypostyle hall at Karnak . . . and like the colonnades of Karnak, the pillars are covered with weird ideographs but in some unknown, surely not human, language.

I am approaching the great altar, which is rayed like a starfish, hollowed and scooped out in the center, and filled with some red fluid (blood?). My attention wanders to the vast bas-relief cut on the wall behind this curious star-shapen altar, and with a thrill of unearthly and mind-chilling horror I recognize thereupon the ghastly likeness of that primordial jade image from the waters off Ponape—but *ten thousand times more huge*, and incredibly detailed, with almost photographic clarity—*oh my God!* The thought suddenly seizes me that *it is a likeness done from a living model*—I awake screaming, my throat raw, with my house-keeper clutching her kimono about her bosom and asking me if I am well. Well? I hardly know . . . such dreams as this cannot originate in my mind . . . *unless put there by Another!*

(DREAM 4; PERHAPS 3)

On another night, I find myself approaching a great monolithic temple on the summit of an immense height. It is again night, and an evil, sickly moon leers down through coiling medusa-mists . . . people are all about me as I ascend the height—weeping, kneeling, huddled. *They are not quite completely human*—squat, hunched, anthropoid, with very much more body-hair than in normal today, almost amounting to a pelt. There is a vaguely Asiatic look to them, lemon-yellow skin, slanted eyes black and liquid, prognathous jaws and heavy brow-ridges.

The worshippers are striving to avert some threatened doom or punishment, perhaps natural; and as I advance up the long slope (covered, I notice with what looks like Jurassic conifers!), the grounds shudders beneath my heel and thunder growls in the mist-veiled sky—suddenly, a line of black mountains on the horizon burst into flame, one by one! *A range of volcanoes*, sulphurously alit in sequence, like a row of candles ignited in turn by some unseen Hand! The people around me—or subhumans—are moaning some hellish, grunting litany—"Idh-yaa; Ythogtha; Cthulhu; Nug—"

Suddenly a crevice opens in the earth at my very feet—world-deep, black as the Pit itself! It fills rapidly with gurgling slime and the hunched and moaning worshippers shrink back in nameless dread from the *immense, wet, glistening, white, pulpy, worm-like*—I can not stand it; I force myself awake . . .

(DREAM 5)

In this dream I am descending slowly through graduated levels of green light, which grows steadily more dim; it is as if I am sinking (or being drawn down?) into the depths of the ocean. The sensation of cold wet darkness pressing upon me is stifling, oppressive . . . then I am floating above a mounded plain of slick black mud. It is drowned in green-black gloom, and little is visible . . . now I approach a truly immense crater or chasm in the ocean's floor . . . I glide over the lip and descend, it seems, for a very long time . . . the crater seems to be miles deep . . . the last vestiges of emerald light slowly fade into utter and abysmal blackness.

When at last I reach the floor of the great depression I can somehow

see again—I think the oily ooze that covers the crater floor is dimly phosphorescent with decay or radioactivity . . . now I am nearing a huge mound in the center of the crater . . . it resolves gradually out of the all-but-impenetrable gloom . . . it is a structure of some kind, but it has not the workmanship of human hands, the stone blocks are Cyclopean, and the rows of truncated pillars are . . . it is the Temple of which I have dreamed, and dreamed, and dreamed, before! *It is the House of Zoth-Ommog*—oh Christ save me—that sickening *light!* That gloom-piercing light that blazes from the Elder Sign on the Door—*No, damn you, I will not touch it . . . remove it . . . release . . . —I must WAKE UP—*

(DREAM 6 OR 7)

The drug that Wollstone prescribed has done me no good at all, for I have now for seven consecutive nights dreamed the same dream, precisely identical in all respects: I am standing in my night-clothes on the beach at Wexton Pier on the outskirts of Santiago; I am shivering with the cold, but brimming with a weird and terrible exaltation . . . clenched in my hands is a sheet of written matter—something I searched and searched for in the Copeland Papers—the Invocation of the Yuggya—the Great Invocation from the damnable and loathsome copy of the *Yuggya Chants* that raving idiot Copeland purchased from the Lascar sailor on the San Francisco waterfront—Oh, God, I am going to *read it aloud*—with a terrific effort of will that leaves me shaking and gasping with exhaustion, I wrench myself awake . . . I must burn that copy of the Invocation—yes, and the filthy old book, too! I . . . *must . . .*

(DREAM 7; PERHAPS 6)

Tonight as I fell asleep, I passed into a very deep slumber as if drugged, although I have taken none of the prescription the last two nights, fearing the after-effects, which leave me lax and curiously lacking in will . . . From this heavy slumber I came gradually half-awake within my dream, and *Someone was whispering to me in a soft, guttural, seductive voice—had been* whispering to me for a long time before I wrenched myself half-awake—Suddenly I awoke completely, found myself trembling before the wide-open window, incoherently repeating over and over “No! No! *I will not do it!*”

But what was the window doing *open*? Surely, I closed and locked it before retiring—as I do every night, when the wind blows in from the sea . . . and what was that slime or jelly smeared all over the window-sill—like slime from a snail-track, but if so, it was the very Father of all Snails . . .

I must see a doctor—*soon*.

(DREAM 8)

My condition is steadily deteriorating; now, somnambulism is included among my symptoms, for Mrs. Wilkins says she has found me walking in my sleep seven times in the past week and a half, and once she found me lurching down the driveway towards the street . . . I asked her (half-dreading to hear the answer), which direction was I heading? She says the Waterfront—*towards the Pier*.

I must burn that Invocation; and the horrible ancient book I copied it from; and I would to God I had not let the Directors persuade me to print that lengthy narrative from Copeland's translation of the *Zanthu Tablets* or that hellishly suggestive excerpt from his Asian diary in the *Journal of Pacific Antiquities*! Why in God's name didn't I tell them how much I know—I *could at least have hinted at the mind-blasting TRUTH behind his cursed Xothic legend-cycle!*

Some things we were not meant to know.

Some things it is . . . dangerous to learn . . .

Last night the Voice came again and whispered to me for hours as I lay half-conscious . . . Oh, I would like to see far Addith where the Metal Brains dwell, and Zaoth with its old books cut on plates of *lagh-metal* from Yuggoth, books that pre-date the creation of the earth by thirty-seven million years . . . God help me, I would like to see primal and doom-fraught Mu before the Towers of Fire from Betelgeuse whelmed and trampled it down beneath the rolling waves . . . the Yuggya can disembody my thought-lattice (they whisper) and set me free in time and space . . . to visit Calaeno and Yith and Ymar, and horrible Shaggai . . . *but I will not be the agent of the Old Ones, nor burden my soul with the massive guilt of the slaughter of this planet . . .* which will certainly follow if I do Their bidding, and loose frightful Zoth-Ommog from his Deep . . . *Our Father which art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name—*

(*Postscript:* On the night of August 3rd, a Santiago police car saw a man in white pyjamas standing knee-deep in the surf near Wexton Pier, apparently reading a letter by the light of a match. Approaching him, Officers Harlow and Kellar shone their flashlights in his face. He seemed to be asleep, but the blinding light awakened him and he realized suddenly where he was and what he was doing. Paying no attention to the patrolmen, he suddenly, with white, shaking fingers touched the burning match to the sheet of closely-written paper he held, and hurled the blazing sheet into the dark, foaming waters. In that same instant, following the flight of the burning paper, Officer Kellar turned his light on the black waters, and reports that he glimpsed something enormous, round and slick, and white—but not remotely suggestive of a human body, he is certain.

At that moment, the wild-eyed man—later identified as Henry Stephenson Blaine, Ph.D., manuscript collection curator for the Sanbourne Institute in this city, apparently saw the thing in the surf—probably much clearer than did either of the Officers. For he staggered back with a horrible wailing screech that one of the Officers, who has been both a prison-guard at San Quentin and a security guard for an insane asylum, describes as the cry of a damned soul—"the most horrible sound I ever heard come from a human throat," he said, sweating and pale.

As the two patrolmen waded out to him, Dr. Blaine fell on his knees in the foaming surf, and clapped both hands over his face, covering his eyes, screaming hoarsely: "God! God! Horrible—I *have seen a Yugg! A Yugg!—Jesus—God—a Yugg!—God—Iä! Zoth-Ommog!—cf'ayak ghaaa yrrl'th tho-Yuggya! Yaaaaaa-n'gh—*"

The police closed and grappled with him; he reportedly made no resistance, but was so shaken with uncontrollable spasms of trembling that he could not stand and had to be carried to the patrol car. Along the way, he babbled with desperate urgency to his two captors—or rescuers—"I am mad or going mad—get to Hodgkins at the Institute—the stone thing from Ponape—God damn that mad fool, Copeland!—tell Hodgkins—the jade idol must be destroyed—*must be smashed, d'you hear me?—Kill it, kill it, kill it, killllllll—*"

Dr. Blaine then collapsed in utter exhaustion and was admitted to Mercy Hospital Psychiatric Emergency Ward at 3 o'clock in the

morning. He has been there now for two months; in all that time he has not spoken a single word, except for a gobbling sound he repeats over and over, which sounds like "Yugg—Yugg-Yugg!"

He is now kept under forcible restraint for his own protection.

I have perused the manuscript found among the papers on his desk and forwarded to me by his assistant, Mr. Hodgkins. I have reached, and can reach, no final conclusion regarding it and its chaotic contents.

But with one remark found therein I heartily concur.

Some things we were not meant to know; and some things it is dangerous to learn. To which, recalling the horror and loathing suggested in the patient's data on the monstrous worm-things he calls "Yuggs," one of which he believes he saw clearly in the blaze of the policeman's flashlight, I should perhaps add: *some things it is death and madness to see.*

For since that night of cataclysmic horror Dr. Blaine has attempted to blind himself eleven times.

(signed) Robinson Dambler, M.D.
Physician-in-Charge.

Awakening

DAVID DRAKE

THEY remained some time in silence in the shadowed parlor, alternately sipping their tea and staring idly at the dim trees to be seen beyond the gauze curtains. At last Mab cleared her throat, a little coughing sound. The man looked up. "Mab?"

"Frank, I think it's time we try. We'll never see Missy's equal, you know."

Frank set down his cup and saucer on the old walnut table. He ran his left hand through the mane of iron-gray hair he cultivated, almost all that was left of the splendid man he had looked in his youth. "I suppose you're right," he finally admitted. "My . . . aspirations aren't what they were, I suppose. And Mab, I'm very much afraid the girl isn't ready yet. She still doesn't think of herself as one of us."

"Missy has had a year in this house, Frank."

"She had twelve in the alley and the orphanage, learning that witches are hags that live in dark corners, learning to laugh when one is pushed into the oven. Her first reaction . . . well, Missy isn't a subtle child."

Mab, matronly in a print of pastel roses, clucked disapproval. "Nor is she stupid. The time Missy spent here was more than enough for her to realize what she is, and what we are. It's our duty as her elders to keep her from wasting herself."

Frank bit absently on the setting of his ring. "She can't be forced—no, I don't mean physical force, of course not. But we can't make her believe what she doesn't want to believe; what she's been conditioned not to believe. It won't help even to prove to her that she has the

Power. That would only mean to her that she herself is evil, and she'd hate you for it. At best she'd not join us; at worst, with her Power . . ."

Mab smiled. "Now Frank, it's the girl's strength that worries you. But it's time and past time that I stepped down. I was never a very good Maid—now I know what you want to say, I was very well trained. You taught me everything that could be taught; you were wonderfully patient. But I never had the Power; that can't be learned."

"Yet she can't even read Latin," said Frank, sadly shaking his head.

"No," agreed Mab in a firm tone, "and perhaps she never will. Our Missy isn't a scholar. But she has an understanding of things that you and I can hardly imagine."

She reached over to the table and rang a sharp ping from the bell.

"Madam?"

The girl in the doorway wore a maid's uniform with a cap and apron. Dark hair and large eyes accented her triangular face.

"Madam?" she repeated.

"Missy, Mr. Birney and I—"

"Oh. Mab," cut in Frank, lifting his corpulence from the overstuffed chair, "perhaps I'll leave you and Missy to discuss matters by yourselves."

"Frank; you'll wait, won't you?"

"In the hallway." Frank nodded to the two women and closed the hall door behind him.

"Well, Missy," Mab continued, "I—but do sit down, Dearest; this isn't business."

She waved to the seat Frank had vacated, but the girl took a slat-back chair farther from her mistress.

"You've been with me some time now, and you have gotten to know myself and the group of friends that meet here. We'd like you to join us tonight."

The girl fluttered her hands. "Ma'am that wouldn't be right, not me. I'm not your sort."

"But you are our sort," Mab insisted calmly. "The mirror in your room, for instance—"

Panic flashed across Missy's face and Mab quickly added, "Oh, don't worry Dearest, that's why we put it there. It was an old glass and rather difficult to find, but we knew it was meant for you."

"I'll not do wrong things," the girl insisted sullenly.

There was a light squalling outside the kitchen door, a scratch of claws and a dark-tipped Siamese cat slipped into the parlor. It curled silently under the girl's chair but kept its eyes on Mab.

"We wouldn't have you do wrong," Mab continued with a toss of her gray hair, "but everything proves that it's right for you to join us. Even the way animals treat you—it isn't only Kaimah, is it, Dearest?"

The girl said nothing, only squirmed a little on her seat.

"They aren't like that with me," Mab said, "but I don't really have the Power. But you do, Missy. To an amazing degree."

"No, Ma'am," Missy whispered. "I haven't nothing. I shan't have it."

Mab appeared not to have heard. "Frank was disappointed when you ignored the books we left about, but I understand. Perhaps you'll want them after you've been with us a while."

"Ma'am, Ma'am," breathed the girl, twisting her apron between narrow hands, "I don't want to be with you, I want to go . . ."

"Because we're witches?" Mab questioned gently. "There's nothing wrong in being a witch, Darling."

"I don't want to be a witch," cried Missy, slipping from her chair and behind it as if the wooden back were a shield. The cat retreated between her legs, not hissing, but stiff-legged and its backbone edged with a high comb of fur.

"But Dearest," pressed Mab inexorably, "you're already a witch—"

"Oh, no!"

"—the most powerful witch I have ever met."

"NO!" the girl screamed, and a gabbling cry burst from the older woman as the first blast of searing heat struck her. Mab half rose from her chair, cocooned in white flame that melted flesh and shrank her very bones in its hissing roar.

"Mab! Mab!" Frank shouted, bursting into the room.

There was no answer. The room was empty save for a shrunken mummy fallen back on the scorched upholstery of the chair. That, and the thick layer of soot that covered everything.

The open door to the kitchen quivered in the draft.

In the Vale of Pnath

LIN CARTER

NIGHT after night, tall corpse-fat candles burned slowly to the socket in the narrow, pointed windows of my old house of black gneiss on its lonely headland above the northern main, as I studied the wrinkled scrolls of pterodactyl vellum, searching the crabbed and ancient hieratic script for the secret of the Ygthar elixir: but I sought in vain.

Thus had I, the necromancer Eibon, reached an impassé in my studies. The trove of antique scrolls, wherein I had first learned of the remarkable properties of the Ygthar elixir came from an icelocked and aeon-crumbled tomb in the desolate wastes of Mhu Thulan. This sepulchre, and the ancient scrolls it contained, were reputedly those of the great Zon Mezzamalech himself, a potent and terrific sorcerer whose thaumaturgical accomplishments were common legendry. This Zon Mezzamalech had flourished in elder and remote cycles, and I can only assume that in his long-forgotten epoch the ingredients, whose subtle admixture lent astounding powers to the elixir, were familiar; while the knowledge thereof had decayed with millennia, and by the dawning of our own benighted era had lapsed from the sapience of we lesser and latter-day mages.

With slow and painstaking toil I had one by one decyphered the nature and name of the several curious components of the precious Ygthar; one alone eluded my knowledge, and that was the substance bafflingly referred to by the enigmatic Zon Mezzamalech as *the Glund fluid*. In vain I searched my encyclopedias of enchantment, my dictionaries of demonology, my compendiums of cantrips. Nowhere in the

writings of the mightiest magicians of all Hyperborea could I find a single reference to the maddening and elusive Glund fluid. Names evolve from epoch to epoch: common usage obliterates one term, replacing it with a neologism: I was taunted with the chance that the mysterious fluid might lie close to hand, hidden behind a variant cognomen. And I was determined to achieve the secret at any cost.

Fruitlessly I consulted my sorcerous brethren, but they too knew naught of the enigmatic Glund. Through a powerful crystal I queried those who dwelt on anterior worlds or the planets circumambient about remote stars. From one of these more distant colleagues, a certain Maal Dweb, dominant thaumaturgist of a world known as Xiccarph, I first heard of a deeply-learned sage who dwelt alone in a curious house below the Peaks of Throk. My ultra-telluric colleague was adamant in his contention that if this individual, by name Shuggob, did not possess the secret of the Glund, then it was known to none other in this aeon.

I entertained some reluctance at the thought of journeying to that far-distant and somewhat dubious realm, of which elder texts whisper unhappy things, and of which the praeceptor under whose tutelage my youth had been spent had uttered stern warnings. Alas, had I but paused . . . but lingered, to consult more deeply the librams and folios of my sorcerous archives, ere my rash and impulsive nature drove me thence into the shadowy and repellent Vale of Pnath! But a lust to achieve the final secret of the wondrous elixir impelled me with irresistible force; and I reflected upon the apothegm that faint heart wins naught.

And thus, by a mode I shudder to recall and shrink from describing in detail, I came to the Seven Hundred Onyx Steps, wheredown I ventured, and to the Gate of Deeper Slumber, wherethrough I passed, and set out through the Enchanted Wood. Cloaked in somber gloom was this ominous wood, where prodigious and malformed oaks twine groping boughs overhead while furtive small unblinking eyes like chip rubies glitter from the depths of the nemoral umbrage at their gnarled and intertangled roots. These woods, I knew, were the haunt of the sly and secretive Zoogs—concerning whom legend whispers naught that is remotely wholesome—and thus an hearty relief was mine when once I had passed therethrough without challenge or obstacle.

By the dim and daemonic flickering of far aurorae (whose vague

phosphorescent luminance included nine tints unknown to any telluric spectrum), I at length espied the distant serrations that were, I knew, the fabulous Peaks of Throk. I went by cautious ways now, for these shadowy regions were haunted by obscene and monstrous Things which shambled squealing from my path, driven hence by the potent runes etched by acids distilled from the slobber of basilisks, wherewith my Arthame (or wizard's sword) was rendered repellent to That which dwelleth in these vales.

I went on, across rolling hummocks of beslimed and colorless lichen which crunched into oozy smears beneath the tread of my mastodon-hide sandals. All was utterly black about me now, save for the skyey banners of vaporous illumination which flared and flickered far overhead. The Peaks of Throk rose grey and towering above me now, like a wall builded by mad Titans, and peak by peak loomed against the dark, licked by the faint flames of the fantastic aurora.

In the dimly-litten fields wherethrough my path led me I came at length to a curious cottage, whose thick opaque windows leered from under low roofs like a madman's glazed eyes glaring from beneath a glowering brow. All of grey crumbling stone was the low strange house: of very ancient stone was it builded, dry, powdery, porous, and flaking. For a lawn the old low house drew around it scabby patches of mould and lichen: for hedges it had swollen clumps of hideous and mottled fungi.

The door was a coffin-lid of black, worm-eaten wood, and the door-knob was a rondure of polished white ivory which I knew shudderingly for the skull of a human being.

Natheless, I knocked—and my flesh crawled at the touch of the wet, rotten, coffin-wood—and at length my host welcomed me and bade me enter. This Shuggob was an elderly and gentlemanly Ghoul of quiet, scholarly habits, tall and lean, grey-skinned, and somewhat the worse around the nostrils, the eyelids, and the corners of the mouth, for the depredations of maggots. He greeted me with modest words, offering his hand (which was cold and rubbery and terribly strong) and ushering me into his parlour where cold meats that lay carven on a platter and gelid wine in lead goblets made a mild repast, whereof he bade me sate the hunger and the thirst occasioned by my journeying hither. But the wine, cold and sluggish, darkly crimson and bescummed, bore resem-

blance to congealing gore drained from the arteries of a putrifying corpse; and the cutlets of cold white meat, finely-textured and delicately crisp, in their curve and contour, might have been sliced from the flanks of human infants; so, restraining a small shudder of revulsion, I declined to sup, and pressed the conversation to the matter of my business.

To my unutterable delight the Ghoul quietly acknowledged his familiarity with the elusive fluid of the Glund: in fact, he informed me, he had even at this moment a decoction of the rare liquid brewing in the vaults beneath his ancient low house. He discussed the Glund fluid at some length, but in slurred liquescent syllables whose meaning was most difficult to ascertain, such was the state of decomposition advanced age and a questionable diet had brought him to. I liked not the clammy darkness of the room, the faint creaking of the floor behind my chair, the stench which at intervals arose from distant cellars; and as the gluttonous, slobbering speech of the Ghoul Shuggob droned on I became faint with an eagerness to be gone from this low strange house of ancient stone and from the Vale of Pnath itself. So I did not prolong my stay by requesting him to elucidate those of his remarks which had escaped my understanding, but with some abruptness begged to view the precious fluid.

He led me from the room and through gloom-drenched apartments, cobwebbed with neglect, whose floors were littered with gnawed bones, and raised a trapdoor whose mould-encrusted stone slab was loathsomely reminiscent of a tombstone. Down slimy steps into frigid blackness we descended by a curving stair, and all the while there blew unceasingly in our faces a cold wet wind of unspeakable foulness from the unknown depths—the dank breath of the Pit itself.

We came at last into a bare stone vault whose velvet gloom was dimly-litten by the greenish pallor of a ghostly light, a sourceless and unhealthy luminance that was like the phosphorescence of advanced decay.

By this disgusting glow I perceived something like a huge round cauldron of slick white stone, which held cupped and quivering a swollen and monstrous bloated thing of grey jellied slime. What it was I knew not, but it was loathsome to the sight: glistening, moist, pulsating with hidden life. And the rounded surface of it was a mass of wrinkled, twisting, worm-like convolutions, which all the while leaked

a cold, oily slime whose stench was unbearably vile. I saw that *cruel hooked knives* were thrust in the thing and that the unceasing irritation they caused occasioned the slow dribble of the slimy leakage.

Mastering my revulsion, I leaned closer to the quaking mass of swollen matter, while the Ghoul Shuggob in his slurred and slobbering speech informed me that the oily trickle I observed was none other than that fluid wherewith the testaments of Zon Mezzamalech claimed the Ygthar elixir could only be made.

Closer and closer to the bloated grey thing whose wrinkled and pulsating surface oozed repulsive ichor I leaned, and suddenly by the ghostly faint light I thought I glimpsed—could it be true?—O Lord Tsathog-gua!—I screamed, sickened to the very roots of my soul; screamed, and fled madly up that coiling stair and from that horrible low house in the Vale of Pnath; and in all of the innumerable cycles of my sorcerously-prolonged existence from that hour to this, never again have I dared visit the dubious and disquieting shadowy fields of the Vale of Pnath; and to this hour my dreams are made hideous by my memories of *that* which I glimpsed in the dim green phosphorescence of ultimate and abominable decay . . . of that naked, glistening, swollen, obscene *living brain*—tortured beyond endurance and not able ever to die—whose vile and slimy effluxion is the lost secret ingredient of the horrible elixir which now I shall never brew, and of whose remarkable properties I shall now never be certain.

Chameleon Town

CARL JACOBI

THE FIVE Checkmates drove into Kingsport that August night in a wrecked Plymouth. Thirty miles back they had caromed off the highway when Dr. Lucius James, who had been driving all day, fell asleep at the wheel. They had headed east down a narrow road because a sign had promised mechanical aid in that direction. But the road, showing little signs of travel, led them farther and farther from the highway. When they finally reached the garage in Kingsport, they were told repairs to their car would require six hours. So the Checkmates put up at the local hotel.

They called themselves the Checkmates because of their hobby. Chess by mail! For three years they had exchanged letters, never seeing each other, but playing the game they loved by correspondence. At Dr. James' invitation, they had finally met in New York, and then driven south with no particular destination, enjoying their new camaraderie.

As their host, Dr. James alone was on native soil. Gomez had never before been out of Mexico. This was an initial trip across the Canada boundary for Lamont Cagle. And Newcombe and Fielding were first time visitors from London.

Now at the Kingsport hotel, Dr. James left the others in their room and set out on a nightly stroll, a habit he was not about to forgo despite his fatigue. The backwater town was deserted at this hour, and he strode along, enjoying the solitude and the clean brisk air. His steps led him to the harbor, which was larger than he had expected. Here a pier jutted out into the Atlantic and fishing craft rode at anchor. He lit a cigar and stood, listening to the water against the piles.

And then quite suddenly he became aware of his surroundings. He remembered being here before!

It was impossible, of course. In all his fifty years he had never visited this part of the East Coast, much less this obscure town. Yet as his eyes fixed on detail after detail, the familiarity was unmistakable.

The old plank walk, the shadowy warehouses, the distant rolling combers of the ocean—everything was like a picture post card committed to memory. He began to walk down the pier. Dories, yawls and luggers bobbed in the swell. He remembered it all. His eyes singled out a low white-hulled sloop with the name *Sea Witch* on its bow, and it too was vivid in his memory.

How long he stood there he didn't know. But presently he became aware of a man and a woman advancing down the pier. Engrossed in each other, they paid him no heed but passed within a few feet of him and descended to the deck of the sloop.

There they fell into each others arms in a passionate embrace.

A second shock swept through Dr. James. He recognized them. Recognized them with a conviction that could not be denied. They were straight out of his past. They were his wife and Paul Ganlon, the man with whom she had run off.

Dr. James rubbed his eyes. Two years! Two years they had been dead. Two years ago they had drowned when this same boat had foundered in a storm miles to the north. Now here they were, back from the grave. He didn't know how or why. He only knew that all the justified desire for retaliation which he had managed to suppress these many months, suddenly rose within him. He strode forward to the deck of the sloop and came up before them. The woman's eyes jerked wide, and the man fell back.

And now Dr. James was unable to separate fancy from reality. He found himself lunging, raining blows upon his man who had so ruined his life. Blindly, madly he struck out. Against the onslaught, Ganlon reeled across the deck, stumbled against a capstan and fell. His head struck with a horrible sodden thud, his neck canted, and he lay still.

The woman seemed dazed. She rushed to the fallen man's side, and when she realized he was lifeless, she staggered across to the rail and clung there, half in space. Then with a sobbing cry of despair she slid over the side. An instant later, when Dr. James followed and looked down, he saw nothing but black water below. When he turned and

looked back across the deck, the body of Ganlon too was no longer there.

And he knew that this episode of unreality was ended. None of these things had happened. It was a phantasmagoria, a fancy of his mind.

Somehow he made his way back down the pier, retraced his steps through the town and reentered his hotel room. His four companions were playing chess. He was thankful they were too engrossed in their game to notice his trembling hands or the sweat on his brow.

"Go take a walk," he said hoarsely to Gomez. "Take a look at the harbor."

After the Mexican had gone, the physician took his place at the table. His throat was dry; a pulse throbbed at his temple.

"You seem nervous," Fielding said. "Anything wrong?"

Dr. James shook his head. By nature a taciturn man, he could not bring himself to reveal his inner thoughts to these men who, until five days ago, had been strangers. But his mind was a millrace. What was the meaning of the events which had just taken place? He was a rational man, but he recently had recovered from an illness, and there were facts associated with the illusion—for illusion it must have been—which left him completely baffled.

Gomez returned. The Mexican's face was flushed. Dr. James studied him, then turned to Fielding.

"You go too. The night is still young."

It was an hour before Fielding returned. There was a perceptible remoteness about him that did not escape the physician.

"All right, Cagle," Dr. James said. "It's your turn."

The Canadian raised an eyebrow. "What's with these night walks?"

But Dr. James was insistent.

And at twelve o'clock, after each of the four had returned from a brief stroll, he sat there in meditative silence, eyes far away. Abruptly he got to his feet and faced them.

"A little while ago during my walk," he said, "I found myself party to things which I still do not understand. Now it may be that you in your walks experienced nothing unusual. But I'm inclined to think you did. I'm going to ask you to sit apart and independently write a description of what you saw tonight. Regard it as the whim of an older man, if you wish."

Five minutes later he was staring at four sheets of paper. It was true then, what he had expected. But it wasn't possible . . .

Why should four complete strangers to this country "remember" this town? For each of the Checkmates had written that he had experienced *déjà vu*. Each had had the impression he was in a place where he had been long ago. Each had thought the fancy was his alone and so had said nothing to the others.

The physician gnawed his lip. "Gentlemen," he said, "it would seem something is wrong here. I suggest we sleep on it."

Early next morning, while the others were still asleep, James walked to the harbor again. His concern over the night before was still with him. There was no sign of the white sloop. An old man sat on a pier post, fishing.

"A forty-five footer," the physician said. "Gaff rigged. Named the *Sea Witch*. Have you seen her?"

The oldster shook his head.

Back at the hotel, the Checkmates breakfasted, then walked to the garage to pick up their car. It was a beautiful morning without a cloud in the sky. As they passed down the streets, a strangeness about those streets struck Dr. James. He couldn't put his finger on it. The buildings were commonplace, the stores and shops like any others. Yet they seemed to possess a dreamlike quality as if they were a painted backdrop.

At the garage, as he paid the bill, the physician asked, "What's the shortest way back to the highway?"

The man jerked his thumb. "That one joins the highway at Winton, the county seat."

"How far?"

"Twenty six miles. But if you're goin' to look for info about Kingsport, you won't find it there."

"Why not?"

The man looked uncomfortable. "Because the town is known there by another name. Kingsboro."

They drove the twenty six miles in contemplative silence. In Winton, on impulse, Dr. James left the others and entered the courthouse. He

went into the clerk's office and spent some time looking over the birth and death records of Kingsport. In the adjoining treasurer's office he found that the garage man had told the truth. All tax and abstract records of the town were listed under the name of Kingsboro.

"When was the name changed?" Dr. James asked.

The treasurer chewed his pencil. "It's been Kingsboro in this office as long as I can remember. Some folks say there's no such place as Kingsport. That's a joke," he said hastily.

The physician returned to the car thoughtfully. He and his four companions then set out to explore Winton on foot. The town was not as old as Kingsport but was more scenic. All the while Dr. James was brooding over the things he had discovered. Before a phone booth, he suddenly paused.

"Wait for me," he said.

He entered the booth and made a direct-dial call to Washington, D.C., to his friend of many years, Hugh Stanley.

"How are you," Stanley greeted when the connection was made. "Still playing checkers?"

Dr. James winced. "Hugh," he said, "I have a favor to ask. I'd like you to look up the circumstances of my wife's death."

"Lucius! Are you still brooding about that?"

"I'm not brooding. But there are some facts I'd like to have, and you're close to the source. I'd like an autopsy report on Paul Ganlon, for one thing."

"Whatever for?"

"See if there was any evidence of a blow or contusion on the body. Then find out if Ganlon ever had any business in Kingsport or if his logbook ever recorded a trip into these waters. Then look up my medical record. I was a patient at Bethesda Hospital and for a short time at the Washington Convalescent Hospital. Get the dates of my entry and release."

"Is that all?" Hugh Stanley asked sarcastically.

"You might go to the United States Health Service and see if they have any epidemic records of Kingsport."

"What do you mean, epidemic records?"

"Well, let's say, how many persons died in the town of Spanish influenza in 1918."

"Nineteen eighteen. That's sixty years ago!"

"Call me at the hotel in Kingsport," Dr. James said, and rang off.

On the street again, he turned to Lamont Cagle.

"Didn't you write me once that you were a sketch artist?"

The Canadian smiled modestly. "Only in an amateur way."

"Well, let's see if we can get you some supplies."

In a photographic store that also carried artists' material, they purchased a small easel, drawing paper and charcoal pencils.

They returned to their car. Dr. James swung about and headed back for Kingsport.

Cagle may have guessed what he had in mind, but the physician had not taken any of his four companions into his confidence as yet. But they were, he told himself, a pretty sharp foursome, and his decision to return to the town they had just left would be accepted without objection. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced they had stumbled on an enigma that must be divided into two segments: the illusion which had effected all of them, and that episode of fancy which concerned his own past, and for which he felt he must have an explanation.

He could understand *déjà vu*, of course. Like all men, he had had that feeling of being some place in the long distant past. But he was not being psychotic, he told himself, in asking Hugh Stanley to reestablish the facts of his wife's death. Even after two years, that dual tragedy was still shrouded in mystery. Moreover, his illness at the time now made him vulnerable for any question about it.

When they arrived back at the hotel, Lamont Cagle said, "What do you want me to sketch?"

"The town," James said simply.

They registered again, to the surprise of the hotel manager. An hour later when Cagle entered their room, he carried several drawings which he spread across the table. To an artistic eye, they left much to be desired, but they abounded in detail, which was what Dr. James wanted.

One of them showed the town's main street with shops and store signs visible. One of those signs read: *Bishop & Son*; another, *Queen's Bakery*; and still another, *The Knight Company*. A placard in a store window read: *Fresh Prawns*. Not "prawns" but "pawns."

There was a sketch of the harbor. Here Cagle had paid even more

attention to detail. The pier and the old warehouse were carefully recaptured. In the foreground was a low hulled sloop.

A spurt of excitement darted up the physician's spine as he saw the drawing of the boat.

"Is it there now?" he asked.

Cagle shook his head. "No, it isn't. I drew it from memory."

Late that afternoon Dr. James went out and began to walk along the street. In a notebook he made notations as he sauntered along. His impressions seemed worth recording, for that strangeness was apparent again. It was a subtle singularity that seemed to make the shadow too dark, the reflections from the shop windows too bright, the streets unreal. As he went on, he noticed that some passersby regarded him with more than casual interest. Several times he thought he saw covert glances directed toward him.

Gradually another sensation stole over him, a recollection far back in his subconscious. He knew in advance how buildings would look, knew the appearance of shops before he came to them. Around the next corner would be a candy store just like the one he had patronized as a boy. It would have a sign like a peppermint stick and in its window licorice whips and those little bottles of chewable wax, filled with a sugary syrup. He turned a corner and the shop was there. Then it was gone, and Dr. James glanced upward.

That glance saved his life. The sign, not a peppermint stick but one advertising a laundry, was swinging violently. Even as the physician lunged sideways, the heavy thing of wood and iron fell, missing him by inches. He turned before a crowd could gather and hurried unsteadily back down the street.

In his hotel room he discussed the incident with the four.

"Of course it was an accident," he said. "But was it? It would have been a simple thing to have loosened the sign's fastenings and jerk the guy wire as I passed. There have been other indications we're not wanted here."

"Yes," Fielding said. "The hotel manager didn't seem too happy to see us return."

"As far as official records go, this town doesn't exist," the physician continued. "But even under its alternate name of Kingsboro, there are things that can't be explained."

"And the illusion of our being here before?" asked Fielding.

"I'm coming to that. Last night we experienced *déjà vu*. This of course is commonplace and happens to everyone at some time in his life. The oddity lies in the fact that five of us felt it at the same time. And we saw things not as they are but rather as we wanted them to be. Cagle substituted chess names, *Knight, Queen, Bishop*, in his sketches because chess was uppermost in his mind at the time.

"Fielding, there's a weekly newspaper here. You and Newcombe check its files for anything unusual, and I'll look them over too. But be careful," he added. "I have a feeling our every move is being watched."

Next day Dr. James accompanied Fielding and Newcombe to the newspaper office. But the task of going through back copies wearied him and he went farther down the street to the library where the shelves seemed to promise more interest. There was no history of the town there, however. There was no book which held the slightest mention of Kingsport's past. And when he looked up the term *déjà vu* in several books, he found the pages dealing with that subject had been neatly cut out.

That afternoon he called Hugh Stanley.

"Where in hell are you?" Stanley asked. "The operator tried to tell me there was no such place as Kingsport."

"There's such a place all right," Dr. James said. "Did you get the information I wanted?"

"Some of it. The *Sea Witch* was wrecked ten miles north of here. Identification of the bodies was positive, made by Ganlon's sister. The coroner's report did mention a blow on the head, but that was to be expected as the storm smashed the boat onto the rocks. One thing is certain. There's no record of his ever sailing as far south as you are."

"Go on," said Dr. James.

"Well, your medical records show that you were released from Bethesda Hospital July 12th. You entered Washington Convalescent Hospital July 15th."

"That leaves three days unaccounted for," Dr. James said. "When did the *Sea Witch* leave on its fatal cruise?"

"July 13th. But that doesn't mean . . ."

"All right. How about the flu epidemic?"

"Sixty years is a long time," Stanley said. "There's a bureau of communicable diseases in Atlanta. They might have what you want. As far as I've been able to learn here, the Spanish flu sailed straight past Kingsport or Kingsboro or whatever name of the town is."

"Okay," Dr. James said. "One thing more, a little more in your line perhaps. You work for the Defense department. I'd like to know the number of men drafted from here."

"I guess I can get that all right," Stanley said. "Just the Korean War and the Viet Nam War, I suppose."

"And World War I and II. And the Civil War."

Stanley uttered an oath. "Civil War! Are you crazy?"

"Don't try to call me," Dr. James said. "I'll call you."

Stanley's phoned report was what the physician had expected. No man had been drafted from Kingsport. Of course, the Civil War, if for some crazy reason you wanted to go back that far, was a flexible thing. Anyone could buy his way out of that.

"It's as if the town has been cushioned against all forces of reality," Dr. James said. "Epidemics, drafts, all the mass happenings which are part of every community haven't happened here. There have been the normal rate of birth and deaths, but all tragic events capable of being prevented have been prevented."

When night came he set out for his evening walk. Trailing cigar smoke, he let his steps lead him once again to the harbor. The streets were the same as they were in the daylight. There was a definite oddness about them. The very warehouses hunched in the background seemed curiously out of plumb.

He came to the pier and strode out upon it. And then his heart gave a bound.

The sloop was there, the same racy boat with its polished brass! But the name on the bow was *Cynthia*, not *Sea Witch*.

Steps sounded behind him and a man and a woman approaching down the pier. The woman nodded politely and the man said "Good evening." They went down to the deck of the sloop.

A great weight was suddenly lifted from the physician's shoulders. He knew suddenly he hadn't seen Paul Ganlon or his dead wife that

first night. He had seen this boat and these two strangers, and he had replaced them with images from his past. And then fancy, or some mystique of this town, had taken over, and he had moved into a complete dream world wherein he had imagined killing his wife's lover and witnessing her death.

Deep in thought, he moved down the pier again and began to walk along the waterfront. He walked slowly, his mind going over and over what he had seen on the pier. About him the air was strong with the smell of fish and wet cordage. He had gone some distance when he became aware of following footsteps. He quickened his pace, but the steps persisted. Dr. James darted into a near alley. Presently a gaunt figure loomed out of the darkness and paused.

Dr. James emerged into the open. "Were you looking for me?" he said.

If he was expecting the stranger to be taken back he was disappointed. The man carried a cane, and he leaned against it casually.

"As a matter of fact I was, Dr. James."

"You know my name?"

The man nodded. "I have been aware of you and your four friends since you came to Kingsport."

The physician looked puzzled. "Who are you?"

"Let us say I am the protector of this community. That's as good a term as any. My name is Black."

Dr. James surveyed the stranger with a calculating eye. He saw a man of middle age and middle build, swarthy in complexion, wearing an odd shaped alpine hat. Even in the partial light the penetrating quality of his eyes was apparent.

"My quarters are close by," Black said. "I suggest you accompany me there. We have some mutual things to discuss." He turned and began to walk back along the waterfront, not looking back, apparently sure Dr. James would follow. And against his better judgement the physician fell in step. The stranger spoke over his shoulder:

"You see, we in Kingsport are very much concerned about the—shall I say, investigative curiosity of you and your four friends. We in this town have a great desire for aloneness. We want no inquiry into our way of life."

Dr. James bristled. "I don't give a damn about any desire for alone-

ness," he said. "There's something wrong with this place, and we intend to find out what it is."

A larger, darker warehouse loomed out of the gloom. Before it the man who called himself Black halted and opened the door.

"If you please . . ." he said.

Some compulsion made the physician comply. He followed Black up a flight of stairs to a second door which the stranger also opened. The room revealed was definitely not like any that one would expect in such a building. It was sumptuously furnished with divans, brocade-covered tables and cabinets; rich drapes covered the walls.

Black removed his hat and coat, lowered himself into a chair and pushed another chair forward.

"Now hear me out," he said. "I said that we are concerned about you and your friends prying. We are more than concerned. In fact, I might say that the lives of your friends rest entirely on you tonight."

Dr. James stared. "Are you telling me my friends will come to some harm unless we . . . unless I stop our investigations here?"

"Your choice of words is mild, Dr. James. But that is exactly what I mean."

"But why?"

"The status quo of our town must remain intact. We will stop at nothing to see that it does."

The physician swallowed. "I might agree to anything. How do you know . . ."

"Oh, I am quite ready to accept your word. You see, I have taken the trouble to look you up, and I know that your record, your reputation, is unimpeachable."

He lit a cigarette. "The most important thing I possess is something that has been entrusted to me—the future of this town. My own way of guaranteeing that future is to see that no one probes into our way of life. And so I say again, the lives of your friends rest with you tonight. For we are without compunction. No legal angle concerns us in the slightest, and although it may be true that there are preventive agencies here as everywhere, let me assure you they would be powerless to stop us."

He leaned forward, and his eyes became intense.

"I have also learned that you possess that indefinable something which

some people call the gambling spirit. I too am a gambler, Dr. James. In the past, on occasion, I have risked much on fortune—that is, fortune tempered with skill.”

“What has that got to do with my friends?”

“I’m saying that you and I might decide our problem in such a manner.” He paused. “We might play a game, you and I. Not any game, of course. No, it would have to be one where the outcome is the result of mental dexterity.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Chess is such a game, Dr. James. I don’t mind saying that chess instills in me an inner excitement which few other things do. I know that you too consider yourself an expert in the game.”

He paused again and spread his hands.

“So we have the stakes. The future of this town against the lives of of your friends. Shall we let thirty two pieces of ivory and ebony decide?”

For a long time the physician sat there without reply. Everything—this room, this man who spoke so matter of factly of life and death—it all tasted of a fiction melodrama. And yet, as he looked into the other’s eyes and saw there the implacable, cold-blooded serenity of the man, he knew the stranger had made no idle threat. He was facing a madman who dealt in death.

Without waiting for a reply, Black rose, crossed the room and returned with a small cabinet. From it he took a set of chessmen.

“I trust,” he said, “you will have no objections if I choose the color of my name. Shall we begin?”

Since the age of ten Dr. James had played the game, but he was far from considering himself an expert. Tonight the enormity of the stakes appalled him. A tremor entered his hand.

Carefully, cautiously they made their initial moves, and as they did, the physician seemed to see his four friends before him. He fancied they stood there, watching, but without the power to speak. The tremor in his hand increased. Inadvertently he touched a chessman.

Black smiled. “You have moved your Knight, Dr. James. I regret the move must stand.”

Silence filled the room, broken only by the muffled pounding of the

waves against the distant pier. The clock on the far wall ticked away a half hour, an hour . . .

It was a curious fact that when Dr. James played he changed from a conservative to an intellectual adventurer. Now as the shadow of defeat rose before him, he began to make moves no astute player would dare to make. At the same time it became apparent that Black's ingrained habits of conservatism as a *position* player began to tell. A bead of perspiration appeared on his brow.

Another half hour passed.

The tremor passed from Dr. James' hands. He lit a cigar as a new confidence came over him.

Rooks moved. Bishops moved. The game wore on.

Another hour passed.

And then suddenly Dr. James pushed his Knight across the board and said very quietly:

"Checkmate!"

Black sat there like an image, as if he hadn't heard. Then with a hoarse intake of breath he leaped to his feet, sending his chair crashing backwards.

But slowly, as he stood there swaying, the stiffness went out of his body and his hands dropped to his sides.

"You have won, Dr. James," he said. "I will keep my part of the bargain."

But the physician shook his head as he rose to his feet. Reaction was setting in, and his legs were unsteady beneath him. A grin turned his lips. He reached for his hat and coat.

"No," he said slowly. "Neither of us has won. But my friends and I will leave here, Mr. Black. We will go and trouble you no more. And"—he strode to the door—"God help you and your town."

The five checkmates were thirty miles down the interstate highway, heading north. In the rear seat Fielding was reading a copy of the *Kingsport Clarion* which he had neglected to return to the newspaper files. It was dated September 3, 1906. His eye fell on a column he hadn't seen before.

"Read this," he said to Dr. James.

What was described as a flaming ball of white light passed over the coast area last night, giving rise to many rumors. It was first said to have struck in the vicinity of Kingsport. Early reports stated Kingsport was destroyed.

Rumors of this kind are difficult to stop. The credibility of persons who initiate them is exemplified by one man, who when confronted with the fact that Kingsport was still intact, declared,

"The town may very well have been destroyed. It is possible what is left may be only a psychic residue of what remains in the perception of its beholders."

Botch

SCOTT EDELSTEIN

FATHER Richard McArdle was meditating at his desk when God spoke to him. He had a strong, low, gentle voice and He spoke slowly and very distinctly. He had no accent.

"Father McArdle?" He said.

McArdle opened his eyes and looked about the room slowly. "Yes?" he said.

"This is the Lord speaking. I have an urgent message I must deliver to you. It is My hope that you will pass it on to the members of your church and to your immediate world. My intuition tells me that you can be relied on to do this. Are you willing to accept the task?"

McArdle nodded, very slowly, without hesitation. "Yes," he said softly.

"The job will not be yours alone. As I speak to you now, I am also speaking to about one hundred spiritual leaders of all faiths, all over your planet. It will be easy for you to contact several of these other members of the clergy; the means for doing so will soon become apparent." He paused. "I had hoped that would be able to converse with you for some minutes and perhaps answer some of the questions that your race has been asking for so long, but I am afraid that this is not possible. My message must be delivered immediately."

McArdle took his pen from its holder and placed a sheet of paper before him on his desk.

"Here the message begins," God said. "Long ago, I became involved in an experiment—an experiment to see how a strange new life form would survive in the universe. This life form was not even remotely

like anything that had appeared previously in the cosmos. The life form was given a finite amount of time to live and to prove itself. If it succeeded in proving itself within the given time, it would be permitted to survive. If it did not prove itself, it would be destroyed. And regrettably, I must inform you, My son, that the time is now up and that life form has failed to prove itself worthy."

McArdle sat silently for several seconds. Then he said, "I understand, Lord. I've often thought about humanity in just those terms. It has been easy for me to view the human race as an experiment—an experiment that failed. I, for one, am prepared to die."

"My son, you do not understand." God's voice was softer, as if it were fading out. "I must explain it quickly before you become unable to hear Me. You humans have done quite well with the world you have been given." The voice became softer until it was barely a whisper. "You as a race will survive for many millennia to come. But for those millennia you must go on without Me."

"I am the experiment that failed," God said, before his voice faded out entirely.

Black Iron

DAVID DRAKE

VETTIUS' markers were of green tourmaline that glinted cruelly in the lamplight. The pieces had been carved by a Persian. Though as smoothly finished as anything Dama had seen in the West, the heads had a rudeness, a fierceness of line that he disliked. Living near the frontier had shaken him, he thought with a sigh.

The soldier moved, taking one of Dama's pieces. The slim Cappadocian countered with a neat double capture.

"God rot your eyes!" Vettius exploded, banging his big hand down on the game board. "I should know better than to play robbers with a merchant. By the Bull's blood, you're all thieves anyway. Doris, bring us some cups!"

The little slave pattered in with a pair of chalices. As she left the room Vettius slapped her on the flank and said, "Don't come back till you're called for."

The girl smiled without turning around.

"Little slut," the soldier said affectionately. Then, to Dama, "How do you want your wine?"

"One to three, as always," the blond merchant replied.

"I thought maybe your balls had come down since I saw you last," Vettius said, shaking his head. "Well, here's your wine; water it yourself."

He filled his own cup with the resin-thickened wine and slurped half of it. "You know," he said reflectively, "when I was on Naxos three

years ago I made a special trip to a vineyard to get a drink of this before they added the pitch to preserve it in transport."

Vettius paused. "Well," Dama pressed him, "how was it?"

"Thin," the soldier admitted. "I'd rather drink Egyptian beer."

He began to laugh and Dama joined him half-heartedly. At last Vettius wiped the tears from his eyes and gulped the rest of his wine. When he had refilled his cup he rocked back on his stool and gazed shrewdly at his friend. "You brought a bolt of cloth with you tonight," he said.

"That's right," Dama agreed with a thin smile. "It's a piece of silk brocade, much heavier than what we usually see here."

Vettius smiled back at him, showing his teeth like a bear snarling. "So I'm a silk fancier now?" he asked. "Come on, nobody will come until I call them. What do you have under the silk that you didn't want my servants to see?"

Dama unrolled the silk without answering. The lustrous cloth had been wound around a sword whose hilt gleamed richly above a pair of laths bound over the blade. He tugged at the hilt and the laths fell away to reveal a slim blade, longer than that of a military sword. The gray steel was marked like wind-rippled water.

"Do you believe that metal can be enchanted?" Dama asked.

"Stick to your silk, merchant," the soldier replied with a chuckle and took the sword from Dama. He whipped the blade twice through the air.

"Oh, yes," he went on, "it's been a long time since I saw one of these."

Setting the point against the wall, the big soldier leaned his weight against it. The blade bowed almost double. The point shifted very slightly and the steel sprang straight, skidding along the stone. The sword blurred, humming a low note that made both men's bowels quiver.

"Thought the way it bends was magical, hey?"

Dama nodded. "I thought it might be."

"Well, that's reasonable," Vettius said. "It doesn't act much like a piece of steel, does it? Just the way it's tempered, though. You know about that?"

"I think I know how this blade was tempered," the merchant answered.

"Yeah, run it through a plump slave's butt a few times to quench it," Vettius said off-handedly. His fierce smile returned. "Not very . . . civilized, shall we say? But not magic."

"Not magic?" Dama repeated with an odd inflexion. "Then let me tell you the rest of the story."

Vettius raised his cup in silent consent.

"I was in Amida . . ." the merchant began, and his mind drifted back to the fear and mud-brick houses overlooking the Tigris.

"We knew that Shapur was coming, of course; that Spring, next Spring—soon at least. He'd made peace with the Chionitae and they'd joined him as allies against Rome. Still, I had a caravan due any day and I didn't trust anyone else to bring it home to Antioch. It was a gamble and at the time it seemed worth it."

Dama snorted to himself, "Well, I guess it could have been worse.

"Aside from waiting to see whether my people would arrive before the Persians did, there was nothing to do in Amida but bake in the dust. It had never been a big place and now, with the shanties outside the wall abandoned and the whole countryside squeezed in on top of the garrison, there wasn't room to spit."

The merchant took a deep draught of his wine as he remembered. Vettius poured him more straight from the jar. "Mithra! There were two regiments of Gaulish foot there, half dead with the heat and crazy from being cooped up. That was later, though, after the gates were shut.

"Wealth has its advantages and I'd gotten a whole house for my crew. I put animals on the ground floor and the men on the second; that left me the roof to myself. There was a breeze up there sometimes.

"The place next door was owned by a smith named Khusraw and I could see over his wall into the courtyard where his forge was set up. He claimed to be Armenian but there was talk of him really being a Persian himself. It didn't matter, not while he was turning weapons out and we needed them so bad."

"He made this? Vettius asked, tapping the sword with his fingernail. The steel moaned softly.

Dama nodded absently, his eyes fixed on a scene in the past. "I watched him while he worked at night; the hammer ringing would have

kept me awake anyway. At night he sang. He'd stand there singing with the hearth glaring off him, tall and stringy and as old as the world. He had a little slave to help him, pumping on the bellows. You've seen a charcoal hearth glow under a bellows?"

Vettius nodded. "Like a drop of sun."

Dama raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps," he said, sipping at his thick wine, "but I don't find it a clean light. It made everything look so strange, so flat, that it was hours before I realized that the plate Khusraw was forging must have weighed as much as I did."

"Siege armor?" the soldier suggested.

"Not siege armor," Dama replied. "There were other plates too, some of them that he welded into tubes, singing all the time."

The blond Cappadocian paused to finish his wine. He held out the cup to his host with a wan smile. "You may as well fill it again. I'm sweating it out faster than I drink it."

He wiped his brow with a napkin and continued. "It was a funny household in other ways. Khusraw, his wife, and his son—a boy about eight or ten. You can't really say with Persians. Those three and one slave boy I never heard to speak. No other servants in the house even though the woman looked like she was about to drop quints.

"I saw her close one day, trying to buy a sword for my foreman, seeing the way things were tending. Her belly looked wrong. It didn't shift like it ought to when she moved and she didn't seem to be carrying as much weight as if she were really pregnant. Padded or not, there was something strange about her.

"As for my own problem, that was decided the morning the Persians appeared. Oh, I know, you've fought them; but Lucius, you can't imagine what they looked like stretched all across the horizon with the sun dazzling on their spearpoints and armor. Mithra! Even so, it didn't seem too bad at first. The walls were strong and we were sure we could hold out until Ursicinius relieved us."

Vettius made a guttural sound and stared at the table. Dama laid his hand on the big soldier's forearm and said, "Lucius, you know I meant nothing against you or the army."

Vettius looked up with a ghost of his old smile, "Yeah, I know you didn't. No reason for me to be sensitive, anyhow. I didn't give the orders.

"Or refuse to give them," he added bitterly after a moment's reflection. "Have some more wine and go on with your story."

Dama drank and set his cup down empty. "Until things got really serious I spent most nights on my roof. Khusraw was working on a sword, now, and I forgot about the other stuff he had been forging. But every time he had the metal beaten out into a flat blade he folded it back in on itself and started over."

The soldier nodded in undersanding, running his finger along the watermarked blade. The merchant shrugged.

"Very late one night I awakened. Khusraw stood beside the forge and that evil white light flared over the courtyard every time the bellows pulsed. Tied to the anvil was a half-filled grain sack. The only noise, though, was the thump of the bellows and perhaps a whisper of the words Khusraw was chanting, and I couldn't figure out what had awakened me. Then another moan came from the house. That sound I knew—Khusraw's wife was in labor and I thought I'd been wrong about her belly being padded.

"Out in the courtyard the smith laid one hand on the grain sack. With the other, all wrapped in hides, he took the blade out of the hearth. The slave let the bellows stop and for an instant I could see both pairs of eyes reflecting the orange steel of the sword. Then Khusraw stabbed it through the sack. There was a terrible scream—"

"I'll bet there was!" Vettius interjected, his eyes glittering like citrines.

"—and inside the house the woman screamed too. Khusraw drew the blade out, half quenched and barely visible, then plunged it back in. There was no scream but his wife's, this time. The slave had fallen to his knees and was making gabbling noises. When the smith drove the sword into the sack a third time, the woman bawled in the last agony of birthing and there was a crash of metal so loud I thought a Persian catapult had hit Khusraw's house. He ran inside shouting, 'My son! My son!' leaving the sword to lie crossways through that sack."

Dama paused. Vettius tossed him a fresh napkin and poured out more wine. "His own son," the soldier mused. "Strange. Maybe Romulus really did sacrifice his brother to make his city great the way the old legends say."

The merchant gave him a strange smile and continued. "That was the last night I spent in the house. Our garrison was too worn down to hold out any longer and every able man in the city had to help on the walls.

"Seventy-three days," Dama said, shaking his head. "It doesn't sound like much to hold out, does it? Not in so strong a city. But there were so many Persians . . .

"No matter. The end came when a section of wall collapsed. The Persians didn't bring it down, we did ourselves—built it too high and it toppled. We tried to mass in the breach as the Persians poured through."

Dama paused with a wry grin. "Oh, you would have liked that, Lucius; the dust was sticky with blood. The armory had been buried when the wall fell and because the Persians were pushing us back, whenever a man lost his weapon he was out of the fight. I dodged out of the melee when my sword shattered on a shield boss. Then, when I had caught my breath I ran to Khusraw's shop, thinking he might still have some weapons I could carry back to the fighting.

"The front of the shop was empty, so I burst into the back. The smith was alone, holding a slender box open on his lap. When he saw me he slammed the lid shut, but I'd already caught the glint of steel inside. 'Give me the sword!' I said. 'No!' he cried, 'it's for my son to carry to King Shapur.' I grabbed the box, then, and knocked him down with my free hand. There was no time to talk and gods! but I was afraid.

"I tore the box open and drew this sword while Khusraw shouted something I didn't understand. Something clanged in the inner room. I turned to see the door swing open, and then I knew what the smith had made of his forgings.

"It was about a man's height, but from the way the ground shook there must have been twenty manloads of iron in it. I took a step back and the thing followed me. Even with the weight I might have thought it was a man in armor, but the eyes! They were little balls of cloudy orange. No one could have seen out through them, but they swiveled as I moved.

"I cut at the head of the . . . the iron man. The sword bounced off.

As sharp as the blade was, it only scratched the thing. Khusraw was backed against the wall to my left. He began to cackle, but I couldn't take my eyes off his creation long enough to deal with him.

"I thrust at the thing's throat. The point caught where the neck joined that black iron skull, but I didn't have enough strength to ram it home. Before I could recover, the iron man closed its hand over the blade. I yanked back and the sword shrieked out of its grip, slicing the metal fingers as neatly as it would have flesh."

Dama laughed grimly and tossed down his wine. "I've mentioned how Khusraw was giggling at me? Well, he stopped then. He shouted, 'Son!' and jumped at me, just as his toy tried to smash me with its fist. I ducked and the steel hand caught Khusraw on the temple and slammed him into the wall. I tried to dodge through the door then, but my boot slipped in the blood. I scrambled clear of the thing's foot, but it had me backed against the wall.

"I thrust again, at the face this time. The tip skidded into an eye socket without penetrating, and the weight of the iron drove the hilt against the wall behind me. The blade bent but the very weight on it held the hilt firm. Then, as the thing reached for my head, the sword point shifted and the blade sprang straight, driving itself through the skull. The remaining eye went black and the thing crashed to the floor.

"There wasn't time to think then. I tugged the sword free and ran into the street to find the Persians had . . . well, the rest doesn't matter, I suppose. I was one of the lucky ones who slipped out of the city that night."

The soldier sighted down the length of the blade. "So your smith put his own son's soul in the sword and it wrecked his machine for him," he said at last.

The slender merchant ran a hand through his blond hair, the tension gone from him now that he had finished his story. "No, I don't think so," he said quietly. "You're forgetting Khusraw's wife."

"Her pregnancy?" the soldier asked in bewilderment.

"She wasn't pregnant," Dama explained, "she was just a vehicle. The smith had his materials, a soul and a body. Somehow his wife's pretence of labor allowed him to join them. The thing was alive, an automaton."

Vettius shook his head. "What you're calling an automaton—there must have been a dwarf inside with some very clever machinery."

Dama smiled gently. "There was no man inside. Lucius, when I pulled that sword free it was as clean as you see it now; no blood, no brains sticking to it."

The soldier looked from his friend to the sword. The blade had a faint green cast to it now as it caught the reflection of the gaming pieces so finely carven by some Persian craftsman.

Selene

E. HOFFMANN PRICE

WHEN Thorne came at last to Selene's home, the Witch Woman saw, and Thorne also, that it had not been time which had changed them. Each knew that this had been their own doing, and it seemed now that neither had acted wisely.

He had wanted her to come into the world with him. Devotion to the Goddess had held Selene on her wooded hillside.

"And now you've set aside your anger, and you're back to bait me?"

"Never anger, Selene. I am back, and what difference why?"

"Marrying Valeria—that hasn't been right?"

"That never was." Thorne shrugged. "I thought it'd be easier to stay away from you."

He regarded her as though studying a lovely artifact. As of old, this dark woman, this most natural, most spontaneous of living beings, seemed to Thorne to be one who had never grown in any cycle of development. She had stepped into being, a completeness.

He wondered again at the exquisite bone structure of head and face. Were she to lose an ounce or two of weight, Selene would be emaciated. Gain a like amount, and the beauty of the bones would be masked. These were abstract art, as it were, which combined with female and realistic flesh. And these were the sustaining cast for the long, dark eyes.

The sheath gown reached from collarbone to ankles, covering all, and hiding nothing. The shimmering fabric, off-white, revealed the shape of the *crux ansata* pendant from the fragile neck chain. Beneath the gown was a ceremonial girdle: silver medallions, with a pendant which masked the sanctuary.

She saw his glance shift from breast to hips, and back again, and almost smiled. "But you have come back, Blake, what there is left of you. I was expecting you, so I dressed."

"But no coronet."

"No coronet."

She opened the door wider to invite him in. Before he stepped into the rustic lodge, Thorne looked over the lower ridges. His glance shifted from twinkling glimpses of the Pacific, and back, with flashes of San Francisco Bay.

A solid city-mass reached from Frisco, and down the "Peninsula," fifty miles, to San José. There, little more than a century ago, with old fashioned pomp and formality, they had hanged Tibúrcio Vasquez in the Plaza, by the city hall. Engraved invitations had been sent to all the notables for miles around. They knew how to live graciously. Today, this ravished land fumed and writhed. Villages had expanded to become cities which over-lapped each other. They spilled into the hills, an invasion of suburban homes.

When haze permitted, the Witch Woman could look into the horror. She had already planned the next refuge, when these final unspoiled ridges would be levelled to make way for swimming pools, barbecue pits, and four-bedroom breeding pens.

Until then, Selene danced, sky clad, when the Moon was full.

She had not rejoined the Coven which she and Blake Thorne had quit.

Her skill was returning. Thorne had never had more than glimpses and sensings. With one other than Selene, he might have mastered the Craft. The fact, however, was that their being a Perfect Couple under his terms had begun to erode the substance which would have made Selene high in the Craft. Not high in power to help or harm—simply, high in keeping open a channel through which the Gods could come and go.

Although they could not halt, they could deflect the poison of science from those who sought antidotes. The food and the fumes could hardly be avoided. However, those were minor evils, since the Gods gave immunity to soul-cancer.

Incense and wood smoke scented the spacious, walnut panelled room. Here it was ever twilight. The lodge was so far from the nearest

feeder that voltage drop made the bulbs murky-golden, like candle flames.

An enormous cat came from the hearth rug. He paused to stretch his lean length. Broad-shouldered—legs bowed—face grim, scarred: the purposeful, the indomitable and untamed creature who had domesticated Man. From the beginning, Thorne had suspected that this was a familiar, or reasonable facsimile.

"Looks as if Wendover is still king around here."

"Surprising?"

"No."

Stately and superb, Wendover advanced. He halted. With human intentness, he regarded Thorne. Once sure he had and was holding attention, he made deep, grumbling sounds. These guttural articulations came nearer to speech than they should have. Thorne felt ill at ease. The topaz-greenish orbs demanded intelligent response.

"How dumb can you be? I am telling you something. This is business."

Thorne risked the silliness of it. "So there is peace between us, you old devil?"

Mutter—grumble—the presence, rather than the sounds, evoked images. Full grown bull. Numidian lion. A stallion. Wendover, arching his back, brushed against Thorne's leg, and majestically returned to the Turkoman rug.

"So I am socially acceptable. He used to take a dim view."

"Wendover knows you won't take me away from the hills. We belong here. Scotch? Bourbon? Brandy? I still settle for tea. Remember?"

"You prescribe! A lot of your tea never came from China. Or India."

His tanned face relaxed. The deep lines, the bitterness, the angles all softened. He leaned back, and drew a deep breath. His glance followed Selene as she passed through the archway.

Although they could never spend quite enough time in bed, beyond the doorway, yonder, it seemed that this had been too much time stolen from the Craft, the Goddess. These had a claim. Long ago, the Gateway between Gods and Man had ever stayed ajar. Now, only Power, ever greater Power, could keep the channel open. This came about because Man was opening the way for other gods—blind, malignant and mindless, despite all the talk of Science and intellect.

These newcomers were idiots whose gifts made Man ever more like those he served. In turning to Valeria, Blake Thorne had begun to experience what he had previously no more than suspected.

Selene presently returned, bringing a pot and two bowls.

"Herb soup, though you might call it tea."

Thorne inhaled subtle fragrance. He set the bowl on the table, and savored the fragile scent again. "You never made any like this."

"There never, till now, was a moment like this."

Finally, he asked, "Are you back with the Coven?"

"Not time yet. May never be."

"Do they—does anyone—ah . . . hate me for—for—"

"For turning me into a non-entity, quite useless to them?"

"If I were disposed of, you'd return to the Craft. Someone calls me a roadblock. Right?"

"They know it's not your fault I've not gone back. They and I are apart, and also, together. You're troubled, awfully troubled!"

"God damn it, yes! Once, only once, the Coven acted against someone." He grimaced. "That fellow was a self-made, custom-built stinker. Driving at a hundred and ten to barrel into an over-pass abutment was a very neat accident, so-called."

"You're becoming accident prone?"

"May go out for sports car racing instead. Well, the Coven is not against me, then, but a solo operator can build up the Power?"

"You do remember some of the teachings. So far, you've posed only one question, and you've not put that into words. Tell me, Blake, have you seen a doctor?"

"Should I?"

"Something is awfully wrong. I don't like your color—that's not tan, it is sick-sallow. Maybe some solo operator is doing something to you. Maybe I can find out." She closed her eyes for a moment. "Do you have a silver coin? Real silver, not the modern funny-money-junk?"

He took a handful of change from his pocket. "Believe it or not, here's a half, real-money."

She took the coin. "Truth is important. You may now say that you bought a cat. Take Wendover with you. He will stay until he feels like leaving. He is fussy about what he eats, and he is inclined to hustle his own."

"Look here—Wendover is something special—I don't want—"

"You'll not be responsible. You'd be amazed if you knew how very well he can take care, look out for himself. And before I forget—a bit of astrology might help. Send me the time, place, and so forth for Valeria."

Thorne frowned. "Where does *she* come in?"

"If you are really in danger," Selene explained, "it may show up conspicuously in the stars of . . . ah . . . survivors who are close to you. Death or danger means more to them than to you. So, such things mightn't show in your stars. Particularly if death isn't important—and it really isn't—you know a bit about the Craft."

Wendover, now at the door, was looking back at Thorne.

Selene got up. "Don't phone. I won't. You'll know when I want to talk to you. Now, that question you didn't put into words. Not now, not yet, but we might, some day."

Blake Thorne's five acres spread out luxuriously, a thousand feet nearer sea-level, and ten miles nearer to San Francisco than Selene's lodge. As always, he took his time returning from the office in which he managed the enterprises which combined to make the Carswell Estate very close to big business.

The more detours, the better.

Eventually, Thorne would be at the head of the table, with Valeria and a few guests—all in all, a graceful exercise in saving face. Despite their four thousand year head start, the Chinese could not have surpassed the Thorne performance.

Valeria sat at her dressing table, retouching her make-up. Between this, and explaining a few things to the man who looked over her shoulder, supervising the art work, she was a busy blonde if ever there'd been one in Hillsborough.

". . . I do not care if no one were ever coming home, we will not have a quickie—*not here!*" She faced about, confronting the tall man who had forgotten to wipe off a pattern of lipstick smudges. Valeria snatched a kleenex and set to work. "The man who never, never comes home unexpectedly is dangerous. Do you have to spoil a good thing, a sure thing, you idiot!"

Rod Mason shrugged. Except that there was not too much iron in his soul, or any great shrewdness in his expression, this rugged man was as

good looking, in his man's way as Valeria was in her exquisitely feminine way— Mr. Woman Bait and Mrs. Man Bait, the ultimate productions!

"Darling, haven't you ever heard of impulse?"

"Such as a blanket beside the stream, near the Old Corral?" She smiled fondly, then got back to business. "Oh, I do know what you mean—this everlasting planning, planning—making sure that we don't have guests too often—never overdoing anything—and then his annual medical—" Valeria shuddered, grimaced, choked. "Oh, let's go, let's get out of here."

No longer perplexed, but quite sobered and subdued, Mason followed her to the front. "Maybe you'd better meet me somewhere, well away from the house."

"And have to explain my car parked for most of the afternoon—or be conspicuous, calling cabs when there's a garage jammed with cars. Those personalized license plates!"

As they made for their secluded playground, well off the road which overlooked the Pacific, Mason gulped. "How long till that annual medical?"

"Will you quit all your thinking! He and I eat the same food, drink the same drinks. I know what I'm doing!"

He regarded her anxiously. Valeria's hair was rippling sunlight, a lustre which no beautician's art could ever imitate. Her translucent skin was all alive, all fresh, vibrant. Lipstick was a formality, in the way of a dress when it conceals elegance instead of covering crudity. Valeria was faultless, except for the fine line between the eyebrows, the microscopic engraving at the corners of her mouth. Save for these blemishes, round-the-clock strain had not marked her.

Valeria and Mason had been on the verge of marriage when Blake Thorne gave her, without realizing it, a chance to assure her future and Mason's. Though bright enough, Mason's talents were of no great use in the more important levels of business. However, he was over-qualified in the potentially profitable business of marrying a well-heeled widow.

Valeria's incredible complexion fascinated Mason, as no doubt it had fascinated Blake Thorne. All genuine . . . phenomenal, and natural, all over . . . bubble bath or shower, or bar of Fels Naptha, peel her down

to the barest of bare, untreated skin and marvel . . . she had explained enough to reassure Mason that her method was fool proof. . . .

Her day with Mason, despite dark moments and tensions, totalled up very nicely indeed. Meeting Wendover spoiled something . . .

The more she saw of Wendover, the less she liked him. She said, a few days later, "I hate that monster! Would you really mind getting rid of him? You're not truly a cat lover."

"What's he been doing?" Thorne demanded, as he reached for the first Martini of the day. Though he ignored the tawny striped cat, he could feel the creature's intent stare. "Getting under your feet?"

Valeria plucked the olive from her glass, regarded it, nibbled a dainty half. "I just don't like that bastard's nasty superior look."

"That's what interested me. That self-assurance." Thorne took a sip. "What kind of gin—"

"Beefeater," Valeria cut in, and sampled hers. She grimaced. "Mnn . . . it's the vermouth." She reached for the glasses and the his-and-hers Martini pitcher. "I'll make them with sherry this time."

Valeria lost little time in mixing a more palatable replacement. Or, so it seemed, for Thorne had been studying Wendover's eyes. They were all alert. One, speculative, the other, penetrating.

The new mix was tasty.

Presently Wendover yawned, stretched, and stalked out of the room. Thorne said, when he had drained his glass, "Never mind the refill, darling. There are several checks I've been forgetting, day after day—I'll write them now, while I think of it."

He made for the study, which was off the cocktail lounge.

He had no more than penned the third signature when he heard the tinkle of glass, and a cry of exasperation.

"You—you—I'll skin you alive—"

Thorne made for the kitchen. She always mixed cocktails there, instead of the bar. One of her whims. He found Valeria on her knees, brushing fragments of two glasses into a dustpan.

"It had to be the good set!"

Taking advantage of Thorne's running interference for him, Wendover pounced from cover and quit the scene.

"I was moving over to rinse the glasses when he knocked them over. He caught my eyes, and then deliberately swept them off the drain board!"

Thorne shrugged. "Probably trying to take a nip of our first round. Plenty of beer loving bar-cats. Why not a gin lover? So you came in. He figured you'd clobber him. So he knocked the glassware down and startled you—first move in getaway."

"That nasty, mocking look! I'll kill that devil!"

"Relax, doll. I'll have André blow a couple of new ones."

Hours later, Thorne still sat in the study, frowning at the papers which engrossed him. Occasionally, he pencilled marginal notes. He sat up, drew a deep breath, shook his head as if to clear it. His concentration was wavering. Uneasily, he glanced about. He had for some while had the unpleasant feeling that he was being observed. Someone—something—regarded him, intently, unwaveringly.

Who—what—where—

No one. Nothing.

Then he heard the feline voice, familiar but muted, guarded, furtive. Thorne stepped to the window. Wendover emerged from a clump of iris. He regarded Thorne for a moment, then set out across the broad lawn.

Wendover moved in a straight line. His peculiar, high stepping gait made it seem that he was part of a ceremonial procession, a ritual in honor of the waxing moon. He paused at a clump of shrubbery near the further edge of the lawn. He looked back, as though to make sure that Thorne still watched. The cat vanished in the shrubbery, only to emerge, a moment later.

After standing, profiled, so that Thorne could catch the glint of something which the cat gripped between his teeth, Wendover stepped into the hedge, and out of sight.

Three days after Wendover's departure, Thorne said to Valeria, "No, I didn't take him to the animal shelter—don't know where he is. Maybe he understood you, and bailed out."

"Did you order those glasses?"

"Next day."

"Oh. So that's where the stems went?"

Thorne did not bother to tell Valeria that he had not picked the pieces from the garbage can. He had been thinking of Wendover's moonlight march. It was time to see Selene.

The Witch Woman was expecting him. This did not amaze Thorne, nor did Wendover's presence. Selene heard his account of the cat's final

evening at the Thorne home. She gave him no chance to pose questions, or to offer speculations.

"Those two stems he carried some five or six miles—do you want to see the laboratory report, or shall I tell you?"

"Your telling is enough."

"The bottom of each glass, the bit that wasn't broken from the stem, had more arsenic on it than gin and vermouth."

"*Each glass?*" Thorne echoed. "Someone's poisoning her and me? The two of us. Then—then—"

"Then she's not feeding you arsenic. Instead of being happy, you are puzzled. Whether or not you realize it, you've been doing a lot of speculating about her tricks. It really sets you back, seeing her as the victim of a common enemy! No, don't say a thing!

"Blake, I don't want to hear your thoughts," she flared, passionately "I can't praise or bless or blame what you suspected or did not suspect. Wait till the Goddess tells us, shows us!"

Thorne grimaced. "Cramps and so forth did have me wondering and I did have some ugly notions at times. Now someone's getting to work, poisoning her."

"I took Wendover to the veterinarian, the moment he came home. He'd been dosed with arsenic."

"He wouldn't touch the cat food. I figured he was getting birds, and scooping fish from neighbors' pools."

"My guess is that he'd been eating bits from her plate and from yours."

Thorne snatched her by the arms, holding Selene with a deadly firm grip. "Naturally, you don't know a thing! Your wonder-cat eats and drinks evidence—he's a familiar—never mind telling me he can't talk—you get the idea without words—give me some answers!"

Thorne choked, gulped, his hands dropped to his sides.

Selene said, "Blake, you've been fed up with the Valeria deal. You had some very nasty notions or you'd never have come to see me. But men are odd about wives, even about one who is somewhat less than a prize package."

"It's not a matter of loyalty at all. It's grim business, condemning your own choice, however much you hate it. So I am saying nothing at all."

"All right! I'm damn well fed up with a mechanized romance. Maybe I did buy her away from someone who wanted her for who she was, and didn't have any background thoughts, as I did. That'd explain the arsenic. And that takes the Coven off the hook."

Thorne's haggard face brightened. His eyes were all alive.

Selene murmured, "I'm so glad the Coven folks don't need any defense. Now that you trust us, maybe I can help."

"How?"

"Ancient herb remedies will get the poison out of your system. And then, I'm sure I can liberate you and Valeria from the poisoner."

"How'd you manage that last?"

"If she left you, you'd not try to stop her?"

"Christ, no! But how would I scare her out—she'd never buy the arsenic yarn! With me, she's got it made. The pickings are too good for Valeria to let go. She'd watch what she eats—well, that supposed jealous lover in the background, first giving me a nasty course of treatment, and then when I'm in bad shape, starting to give her the same—even if she had her suspicions as to who it was, Valeria would take care of herself! She'd never run out."

"Don't be too positive about that." Selene smiled cryptically. "Could you stay away from home for a few days—I mean, so that it wouldn't seem to be a trick."

"No problem. I never miss the sports car races at Laguna Seca—Friday—Saturday—Sunday. And I've often yakked about spending a week in L.A., taking Shelby's high performance driving course, to get a competition license. What's the pitch, sweet?"

"You could be here, instead, helping me and the Goddess to persuade Valeria to leave you, and never come back. But first, you must give her a present."

Thorne frowned. "A present? *Bon voyage?* Well, why not?"

Selene stepped to the cabinet near the fireplace. From a drawer she took a small, flat case, and raised the hinged cover. A small *crux ansata* of silver twinkled against the plum colored velvet. Both the *ankh* and the chain from which it depended appeared to be of the same metal."

"Don't touch it," Selene warned. "It's magnetized. That was one of the reasons I wanted her horoscope data—I had to work in tune with her stars. And, I did want to learn a few things about her, how she's

wired up. If she has the symbol of the Goddess about her, or only touches it and sets it aside, my power will be stronger."

"It does have something odd—stimulating—I can't express it—but it seems alive—"

Selene took the case. She flipped the lid shut, and secured it.

"Don't touch it. Don't look at it any more than you have to. Just tell her that it caught your eye, and you thought she'd like it. From then on, Valeria will take charge and be herself."

"Oh, I nearly forgot—when you hand the *ankh* to her, ask her to clip a lock of hair to give you luck. Bring it to me, right away!"

After a week of intensive practice between instruction sessions, Thorne got his competition license. On his return, he entered his Porsche at Laguna Seca, and saw his name on the list of those who had shown up for Sports Production Class practice. Instead of staying to qualify, Saturday morning, he had the agile car "detuned" for highway driving, and went at once to Selene's mountain home.

"I've been busy as you have," she said. "Come in back, and I'll show you where we'll be persuading her to leave."

The grassy area behind the lodge was a level, irregular patch; a controlled wild growth which Selene had reshaped. There was a close-cropped circular space. Its perimeter was outlined by potted *bonsai*. Each cardinal point was marked by similar dwarfed conifers in copper vessels. This was attractive enough, though not in the tradition of the Japanese masters who cultivated miniature trees, no more than a foot and a half tall, and sometimes, several centuries old.

"Where'd you learn landscape gardening?"

Inane gabbling: he spoke out of compulsion, and he knew it. Selene stood there, ignoring Thorne. Intently, as a hostess making her final inspection of dining table, the witch surveyed the setting.

There was more than he had at first noted: an arrangement of rocks, miniature boulders set into the turf; a simulated spring, gurgling just beyond the circle of *bonsai*. A plastic hose, looped wide, sustained the flow which emerged from a tumble of coconut size rocks. Artificial as it was, Thorne had no more quips about the scene. He wondered at his ever growing tension, at his eagerness, his apprehension, his total unease.

The witch woman was becoming someone, something more than Selene. Her presence, the Power, was reaching out, he told himself. Groping, he wondered how he was to assist her. For the first time, Thorne realized the tremendous expanse of his own ignorance.

He was startled when she said, abruptly, "I hadn't thought of it until this minute, but I think you can do it."

"Do what?"

"That Porsche," she said, as though talking to herself, thinking aloud, "could squeeze along the house—" She raised her voice, and directly addressed Thorne. "You could drive it to the edge of the circle—try it!"

He eyed her. "Uh—um—what—"

She caught his hand. "Moonrise—it's time—come inside now— I'm *ad libbing*—all wild, but it'll help—"

Thorne went with her, into the living room. Breathlessly, she continued, "When I take your arm, to go to your car, help me in and drive me to the circle of little trees, to the spring.

"I will not be I. You will not be you. The Goddess will take charge. Our personal selves, our personal lives, will be more than half blotted out, buried, but don't be afraid. We'll be able to come back."

"Who—what—will we be?"

"I can't tell you anything except, we'll be changing. When I speak to the Goddess, listen but don't answer. When I speak to you, don't answer. Do as I tell you."

Thorne licked his lips. He swallowed the question.

Selene nodded. "Before we become other beings, before my 'I' and your 'I' are masked and blended and scrambled with part of *Her* 'I', try to get a glimpse of what's ahead. Maybe I can tell enough—but don't try to understand with your intellect—that's impossible—don't try to reason—that's meaningless. Feel your way—go with it—till you know it's true, or know it's not. Go beyond intelligence, or you can't go at all."

As a novice in the Craft, he was able to get Selene's meaning, the reality which was nonsense as far as the words were concerned. Her presence enhanced his perception, his insight.

"Valeria," she resumed, after a long pause, "was born in Styria, according to the horoscope data you gave me. Lived there as a teenager."

She saw the un-voiced '*So what?*' which changed his face, and added, "The country is riddled with arsenic. A lot of the natives take it in small doses. They develop immunity. It doesn't hurt them. Gives a clear and gorgeous transparent skin—but *I* should tell you about *that!*"

"An arsenic eater could share your food, becoming lovelier every day, while you slowly died. So, I have to force her to leave you, hide from you, hide from the entire country! You won't accuse her. You won't ever speak against her. You simply won't know where she went."

Thorne almost spoke.

"That lock of hair you got from her, to give you luck. It is giving you luck, right now! It's riddled with arsenic—there's no more guess work—regardless of where she was born, Valeria is an all-out arsenic eater. Now you know."

"And so, you won't stop me. You'll go all the way with me. I promise, I will not harm her, we will not harm her. Simply, mortal embarrassment—she won't want to stay."

Selene stepped away from him. She put on a jacket and a head-scarf, and picked up her hand bag. One did not dress thus for practicing the Craft. Nevertheless, her gestures, as she paced in a circle about Thorne, were those of the Coven, and the words she chanted were in the same language.

Round and round and round, high stepping, stately, poised and balanced, slowly she moved, as though time and cadence were warped out of all relation to reality—yet, always continuous, a dance exquisitely smooth. And her voice: sometimes droning, again, sighing and murmuring as the night-voice of nature: and this was varied by vocal impacts jangling as a sistrum, clacking as castanets.

Numbness took charge of Thorne. His awareness dimmed, then divided until Thorne Number One was regarding Thorne Number Two. Each was curious about a third presence which was still one, yet, becoming two. Selene's dark hair gleamed in gilded waves. Her skin became translucent as she became ever more blended with Valeria.

"Rod," she said, in Valeria's voice and exciting intonation, "Full moon's doing things to me . . . let's get out of this stuffy motel . . . I don't want to go home . . . let's go to our mountain meadow, and I'll dance in the moonlight, and we'll start all over again—take a blanket, take a couple of blankets—"

Selene-Valeria urged him to his parked car. Thorne-Rod and Selene-Valeria crowded into the Porsche. Everything was now clear. No puzzle. No wrath. No confusion. Selene would brew herb tea, and expel all the arsenic in his body. Vaderia would take her exquisite flesh to new lands. Whoever Rod might be, he'd have his turn at eating poison. He would . . . of course he would . . . poisoning is a compulsive game . . . fascinating . . . can't quit . . .

The engine rumbled. Thorne clashed the five-speed gear box but got going. A fender raked a tree. A wheel spun, churning gravel. He booted the car from well coping to jamb of archway, and to the fringe of the grassy area. The oil pan scraped an outcropping rock. He cut the switch.

Selene was on her feet before he could give her a hand. She flipped the blankets into the circle. He followed her through the only wide gap between the knee high miniature conifer trees.

And now her identity was one, and without any shadow presence.

"Get the blankets squared away. Give me a hand, smooth and fold them—you sit right in the center."

He was still kneeling when she flashed to her feet, all straight and poised. "Take off my shoes," she commanded, "and set them by the spring. Then come back. You'll know what to do."

When he returned to the circle, Selene plucked her skirt, raised it almost hip-high. Balanced elegantly as a dancer, she bent back, and extended a leg, and held the pose until, without too much fumbling, he peeled off the stocking. In a twinkle, she shifted to her bared foot, and stretched out the other leg, for him to strip it.

Stately and statuesque, pace as stylized and cadenced as the strutting of a Highland piper, Selene skirted the perimeter of the circle. With each round she paused, posed as no witch in any Coven had ever held herself; and each time, Thorne removed a garment, until she wore only a necklace with pendant *crux ansata* such as he had handed Valeria. Sky-clad, Selene looked up at the moon, spoke a word to the Goddess, then looked down at Thorne, who was adding her final garment to the heap of neatly folded things he was to set on the rock, near the little spring.

"And now I'll dance, till you're sky clad, and for a while after. When I come to you, don't be impatient—but you'll know when—"

Circle after circle after circle—each round, voice rising, higher with

each pace, culminating at each round, in a cry of ecstasy which challenged the stars, and reached toward and beyond them. As he crouched, his glance following her, Thorne began to waver, his identity dividing and coming together again. At times his parted half-selves merged with the Divine Dancer, Selene-Woman, Selene-Goddess. At times, it seemed that he was dancing and posturing while she knelt, arms ritualistically crossed on her breast, fingers caressing the ansated cross.

At last he was sure again that he was he, that she was she: and she clung to him, clinging, enveloping, enfolding, all demanding, ever more demanding—

Until the moment—the moment of knowing that “*when*” was then and there, was here and now.

Each in turn revived, resurrected the other from depletion, from devastation. Their bodies were disintegrating yet they, and his *self* and her *self*, clung mouth to mouth, and in a flash, neither had any need of breath or breathing, and there was only lightness, fragility as of moonbeams. The crux ansata between her breasts had no substance to crush, or to be crushed. Space wove and danced.

“Hold me, hold me and breathe out your life with your breath, and blend with me, my life and my breath—we’ll quit our bodies together, and stay together—as long as we’re willing never to come back, we’ll be able to come back to our bodies. But one flash of fear and we can’t, return—one wish to come back, and we can’t, ever!”

Thorne began to understand when he saw, as from a great distance, his body and Selene’s, too depleted for any visible sign of breathing.

He got her thought: “Riding the wind . . . space shift . . . time shift . . . no space, no time in the astral . . .”

They were at the fringe of a clearing hemmed in by conifers; a spring gurgled. The man and the woman whose garments were neatly folded and stacked on a flat rock were another couple: Valeria, and the lover Thorne had never seen.

Despite gleaming sun-hued hair and white skin, it was difficult to realize that this was Valeria, and not Selene. She lay, all asprawl and love-depleted, an arm outflung, and the pendant *crux ansata* drawing the fine chain, and snuggling against a breast. Had she tried to imitate Selene’s pose, her body-expression of uttermost exhaustion, Valeria could never have succeeded so perfectly.

What Thorne saw was in full scale the miniature landscape which Selene had arranged. There was even a sports car crowded into, and blocking the narrow rocky trail.

"Imitating our witch-scene, obeying our magic. They'll be like our bodies, lying as they are, till they're discovered."

"Discovered?"

"I've arranged for that. A report to the sheriff's office, and the helicopter search. Ambulance and newspaper men and camera men. She'll be leaving. She won't wait to be a widow."

Cruel business; but short of this, he'd never be free of her.

Selene sensed his feeling. "No other way, lover, no—"

"Look—over there—Wendover—"

He thought-pointed.

"Oh, Holy Goddess! Thousands and thousands of them!"

Wendover's quadrupedalian pacing imitated Selene's ceremonial gait in the Moon circle, as he stalked to describe a circle about the lovers. After him came all the cats in the land, and seemingly all the cats in every other land. Long hair, short hair, male and female and neuter, of every size and color, they followed Wendover in his first, in his second, and in his third circuit of witchery.

Still came an unbroken flood of cats, not pacing, not strutting, but a flow, a tide, on and on—

High tide.

The flood buried the unconscious lovers. They were hidden by the rippling blanket. Wendover leaped from the center, making a tremendous bound which carried him well away from the mass. He stood, surveying the feline stream which still gushed from among the trees.

Vindictive, vengeful, he reviewed the legions.

Thorne would have cried out, but he was disembodied and could not. This was witch-vision, and he could not shut out the astral seeing, the perception which did not rely on nerves and their centers. He recalled all the old stories and the discussions he had heard, regarding the danger of letting a cat stay in a room in which an infant lay asleep. Some declared that the cat "drank" the little one's breath. Others asserted that the animal simply smothered the child. Wendover could have handled the task alone, extinguishing the lovers, one at a time. His, however, was the way of magnificence.

"I didn't plan that—and I can't stop them—not the way we are—" And then, fiercely, "And I wouldn't, not even if I could!"

They looked back. The moon was sinking. The Cat Flood ebbed toward the conifers. Wendover, now rear-guard, followed his army.

"No need now to wait for the Sun, lover. We'll awaken our bodies and begin a new day, a really new life . . . and with what you've experienced this night," Selene continued, "we can be a perfect couple, and go back to the Coven."

"I don't care if we never go back—"

"Now I know we're the Perfect Couple, and they'll want us."

The Christmas Present

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

(A slightly different version of this story was broadcast on BBC Radio Merseyside on December 24, 1969; it was produced by Tony Wolfe, read by Gavin Richards, with a specially composed electronic score by Donald Henshilwood, and for these reasons the story is dedicated to them.)

YOU SCARCELY notice Christmas in Liverpool 8, except that there are more parties. On Christmas Eve I made my way early to the pub; as I hurried along Gambier Terrace I glanced up in search of party-goers, but most of the rooms of students and writers of ephemeral verse were unlit, blackly rattling in the wind which swept up from the river around the horned tower of the Anglican cathedral and across the sloughed graveyard, recently scraped clean of graves. Still, by ten o'clock in The Grapes bottles of California Chablis were gathering on the tables; my table had collected three and a half of anonymous Riesling. Not that I knew all the people behind the names: only Bill and Les and Desmond and Jill, just back from London for Christmas, whose hand I was holding. I couldn't place the mute student on the other side of Jill; I'd caught his name and let it drift away among the stained glasses. He was one of those people you always seem to meet in the neurotics' ward of O'Connor's Tavern or arguing with the Marxists at the Phil, a face everyone knows and nobody can name, and I didn't know what to do with him.

We hadn't objected when he joined us, thrust smiling hopefully against our table by the deafening scarved crowd, a drooping streamer supporting his head like a red chin strap—but he'd shown no inclination to provide a bottle. I couldn't bring myself to say "Look, there are

enough of us already"; it was Christmas. Perhaps if we waited he might go away. But at other tables groups were clutching bottles like trunchions and rising, and outside the first police cars were howling their way to Upper Parliament and Lime Streets. "We might as well go," I said and stood with Jill, followed by the others.

At last the student spoke. Jarred, I realized that I hadn't heard his voice, aggressive beneath the deprecating Southern whine. "I've got a present here for someone," he told his hands lurking under the table. "I wanted to be sure it'd be appreciated. Shall I give it to you, then?" he asked me.

"Do I take it you've been watching me to make sure?"

"It was a nice thought," Jill said, squeezing my hand and watching my face. "Wasn't it?"

I knew she needed to believe in the Christmas spirit. "Well, thank you very much," I told the student. "We're going back to my place for a party if you're free."

"Great," he said. His hands ventured forth and passed me a small box wrapped in black paper, tightly sealed and Sellotaped. "I'd like to be there when you open it," he said.

We forced our way through brimming tables and discussions of the art of cinema and emerged into Catherine Street. Fragmented by shadows of branches hard and sharp as black ice, we made our way through to Gambier Terrace, but Diane and Beatrice were out, for their cacti clawed at an unlit window. For a second I thought I heard the tin choir-boys singing carols in the tree outside the Jacey Cinema, but as they faded, buffeted out of shape by the wind, I decided that they were trapped in a radio. Jill was peering through the hedge opposite the cathedral; beyond the Mersey glittered, and at Birkenhead the dinosaur skeletons of cranes had come down to the water to drink in darkness. My hand was frozen around the cardboard box. I hid Jill's in my pocket and we turned into Canning Street.

As we did so I heard the student say "Look at the face on that cathedral."

We looked. An edge of the night-wind slipped into me as I took in the image; the tower's horns had pricked up triumphant and mocking, the long windows were eyes, drawn down and slitted into static evil.

"I wish it had a mouth. Then at least we could guess its thoughts," I said.

"It looks as if it's shouldering its way up from the graveyards," Jill said, and then immediately: "Don't make me say things like that."

"Don't worry," I said. "There no longer is a graveyard."

"Thanks for trying," said Jill. "I've just been staring into that graveyard. If you hadn't pulled me away I might still be there. Why is it so crowded? And why in heaven's name do they have to light it up at night?"

"Come on, Jill, this is no party mood," I protested and hurried her back to the corner of Hope Street, the others curving back in formation and following us like a tail. "They've cleared the graveyard out completely. I'll show you."

"No, John, please don't!" Jill cried.

"Look, don't force her," the student intervened. "He's quite right, you know. No graveyard at all."

Jill steered us back toward my flat. I nodded thanks to the student. "What is your name, by the way?" I asked.

"I'll tell you later," he promised.

"When you've decided in our favour?"

"If you like."

"My God!" I shouted beerily, but Jill gripped my arm. "Look!" she said. "We're being followed."

"By what?"

"Darkness."

I persuaded myself to relax. Turning, I saw that the light at the end of Canning Street was unlit. Behind us our procession plodded; a dark figure, probably Bill, waved a bottle at me. Briefly I thought: surely there were only eight more of us in the pub? How many are there now? But as they stepped one by one over the edge of light, I saw that there were no more than eight—certainly not the few dozen dark shapes that for a moment I thought I'd seen.

When the second light went out I said quickly to Jill: "Someone in the power station is stoned."

"Surely they can't turn off individual lamps," she whispered.

"Of course they can," I said, letting her cling to me as she strode on.

The third light vanished almost before we reached it, transformed into a dwindling image of brightness which receded like hope. Behind us the others shouted comments. There wasn't a car to be seen in Canning Street except the shells at the kerb, and there were two more lights ahead to be passed. Jill was almost running, snatching at the light before it was extinguished. I gripped my present and hurried with her. Beside her the student moved with us. His face suggested an expression which I couldn't read; as it seemed about to identify itself a fist of darkness clamped over his face. We were running. His face reappeared, expressionless, and we'd reached my flat. I glanced back; the others, however many there were, arrived panting. On the steps I hesitated, staring back along the fake Regency facades; surely some of the houses had been lit when we passed? But, an incoherent singing bus weaved past on Catherine Street, my key slipped into the lock, and we piled inside.

Jill and I plunged straight into the party, filling glasses where I'd placed them ready on the mantelpiece, sweeping up my abandoned afternoon's manuscript and burying it in the bedroom beneath coats, drawing back the curtains to attract those who might still be wandering with bottles, lighting the fire and throwing up the window. A record smacked the turntable and caught the needle. A bottle drained; conversations intertwined; laughter sprang up. Someone was dancing; a corner of my Beatles poster tore from the wall, but I'd meant to throw it out a month ago. Jill and I leaned against the chiming mantelpiece and sipped. Jill saw the student before I did, standing at the open window, staring down the lightless street toward the cathedral. As the next record hung alert for the needle, Jill cried: "Listen, everyone! John's had a present!"

"Well, open it," Bill called.

I took the sealed box from among the glasses on the mantelpiece, but the student turned. "No, not yet," he said. "Wait until midnight."

"Why midnight?" Bill demanded.

"Christmas Day."

"Well, that's right," Bill agreed. "That's tradition."

"Tradition," Jill hissed. I could feel her tensing.

"Come on, Jill, sit down, love," I said.

But Bill called: "What's wrong with tradition?"

"Oh, not tradition," Jill said from the couch. "Myths. How can we all stop for a couple of days and get stoned on the myth of human fellowship when people are being murdered in Vietnam?"

"Oh, come on," Bill said, offering a bottle. "Never mind that for now. It's Christmas."

"In Vietnam too?"

"You can't ignore myths," the student interrupted. "A war is a clash between a myth and its antithesis."

"Don't be pretentious," Jill said.

"All right, you stay on your debating-society level, but you wait. I'll show you that myths are dangerous."

Jill recoiled. The arrested dancers looked uneasy. "That's a hell of a generalization," I intervened. "How dangerous?"

"All belief needs is a mob to give it form," he said. "Listen, mate, there's nothing more frightening than people gathering round a belief. And I'll tell you why. Because if a belief exists it must have an opposite. That exists too but they try to ignore it. That's why people in a group are dangerous."

He'd given me a present but I couldn't resist saying: "In that case I'm surprised you came here."

"Ah, well," he said. "I'm safe now."

I think all this was above most of our heads. The second record had fallen unheard, but the touch of the needle on the third galvanized us all; we danced frenetically. Someone tried to draw the student into the dance, but he shook her off and returned to the window. As I whirled with Jill I saw him push the window up and climb onto the balcony, his hair springing up against the darkness. The record spun to a climax and lost the needle, and in the suspended silence we all heard the bell.

At least, we couldn't imagine what else it might be. "It's the cathedral. What's wrong?" Bill demanded. For the bell sounded drowned, its note boomed and then choked, muffled, swept away screaming and was engulfed. It dragged itself back, clanged unbearably loud and then dulled, thudded tonelessly in mud. We all stared at the student's intent back, but he never turned.

"It must be the electricity, like the lights," Bill said, and was about to go on when the voices began. "Carol-singers!" he said happily.

Yes, we thought, carol-singers, they can't be anything else. But there

seemed to be so many coming up from the cathedral, an entire choir. I didn't recognize the tune, and I could tell that everyone was baffled, for the tune led toward recognition and then fled squealing and growling into impossible extremes, notes leaping like frogs and falling dead. The voices squirmed between the suffocated tones of the bell, voices thin and cold as the wind, thick and black as wet earth, and paced toward us up Canning Street.

"What are they singing?" Bill said desperately.

"Does it matter?" Jill muttered.

I pushed past the student and gripped the chill iron of the balcony. But Canning Street was an abyss of blackness, leading to the powerful horned form of the cathedral. I could see nothing, only hear their voices fling a contorted mass of sound toward the sky and into the earth, and wonder whether they were moving to the music. I could only imagine their faces turned up to me as they chanted and knocked at the door beneath my feet.

When I thrust my head back through the window it was too late. "I'll go and give them something," Bill said. "After all, it's Christmas," and he'd gone.

Nobody else moved. Perhaps they were right; perhaps Bill was right. The bell swung reverberating through the sky. I peered down through the mesh of the balcony. Before I could strain sight from the darkness, I heard the street door open. I listened for minutes, waiting to hear more than the clangour of the bell and the packed insistent voices. But there was nothing, except determined conversation in the room behind me, until Jill gripped my arm through the window and whispered urgently: "John, they're in the house. They're coming upstairs."

I dragged myself over the sill and fell into the room. I could hear the voices turn at the first landing, mount the stairs lethargically like a gigantic worm. "Where's Bill?" I demanded.

"I don't know."

"Quickly," I shouted. The voices were bursting forth at the top of the stairs. "Everyone. We'll take a collection. Give them money. Jill, you collect half."

But she was staring aghast out of the window. I whirled. On the balcony the student bent ecstatic against the gale of sound. Jill stood, a cry blocking her mouth; her face drained of colour and wrinkled like

an apple. The voices massed toward the door of the flat. "Don't offer them money," Jill choked. "Give them that present."

I lunged for the mantelpiece, thrusting bodies aside. Everyone seemed determined to ignore what was happening, to leave the decision to me; I waded through entangled conversations and clusters of faces like blank bubbles. I threw out my hand and caught up the cardboard box, and the student pinioned my arm. "Don't touch it, you fool!" he cried. "Not now!"

The voices were at the door, roaring a single note or a million, a sound which could never have emerged from threats but might have burst forth from a tunnel. I struggled with him. "One moment more," he pleaded. "Just to see."

And Jill shrieked and snatched the cardboard box from me and threw it into the fire.

For a moment the trembling flames were crushed, struggling, helpless. The bell crashed like tons of drowned iron; the voices squealed in triumph. Then the flames sprang up, swarmed up the corners of the box, and a minute later it puffed like rotten wood and collapsed into shapeless ash. The bell swung up into an aching silence; a draught muttered where the voices had been.

We waited until Bill knocked on the flat door. "Why on earth did I go downstairs?" he wondered.

"So much for your myths," Jill said to the student. "Damn you."

I controlled myself. "There's one thing I want to know," I said. "What did you put in that box?"

"Surely you can see that that doesn't matter," the student said. "Just something to give form to a belief, that's all. It was a sort of anti-Christmas present, actually. The antithesis of a Christmas present. An experiment, mate, you know. Or do you mean the actual contents of the box?"

"We don't need to know that," I told him. "In fact, I think Jill would rather not." I hit him only once, but he fell.

"Here, hang on," Bill protested. The others looked away. That I expected; but Jill clutched my shoulders and cried: "Bring him round! Bring him round, for God's sake! How do we know where he was before he met us? How do we know he didn't give someone else a present?"

And now we can't bring him round.

Lifeguard

ARTHUR BYRON COVER

THE SUMMER following my third year in the state college wondering what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, I got a part-time job as a lifeguard so I would have more free time to spend smoking grass. There wasn't supposed to be any grass in Blackton, Virginia, according to an article the local newspaper had run on the opinions and witticisms of the town sheriff. "The kids here are good kids," the sheriff had said. "There hasn't been any hint of marijuana or that so-called hard stuff in Blackton." My friends and I had a good laugh over that one. Alcohol was out; the nineteen-seventies had finally arrived; and I was tired of the embarrassing scenes of my brother and I coming home drunk; i.e., like the time I had the dry heaves and, much to the chagrin of my mother, passed out while leaning over the commode. She pulled me out by the hair.

It started out to be a good summer; I was counting my blessings. Three days a week I, Bob Strawn, took it easy getting a suntan, and the other four days I slept, smoked, drove around, balled, played bridge and poker, and did all the other things the fine upstanding kids did. Sometimes I read books and thought deep thoughts about the social revolution of our times, but that was only a gesture; apathy was sinking in fast. Other times I wondered if I should go on and get my masters or just bum around the country for a few years. No matter what, I didn't want to wind up like some of the kids I had graduated from high school with—staying in Blackton all their lives and basically just stagnating.

Not that the country was bad. During the summer the trees were thick with dark green leaves and the sun was bright and the air woke you up in the morning. I liked to walk in the mountains and kick the fragile, damp leaves which had fallen the autumn before and smoke grass, all by myself. I watched the white clouds roll their way across a sky that was as blue as anything I had ever seen. I was really living, Wordsworthian style, I told myself.

But the reverie would soon be over; I had one more year of school and there just wasn't that much to do in Blackton or in Blackton County. I didn't want to get married and sell used-cars with my father. Somehow I had it figured that there were great things in my future, though I didn't know exactly what. However, I didn't think about the future much.

The morning after the Fourth of July weekend, I was sweeping gravel from the concrete and picking up the trash around the pool when that friendly neighborhood pusher, Jack Walker, arrived and told me he was getting some great stuff in that night. Of course I didn't believe him; Jack was a little guy with a crew-cut and a lot of zits and he was mostly mouth. That day he was wearing baggy blue shorts and a red shirt I couldn't look at without my sunglasses. He had scrawny little arms and scrawny little legs and a beer-gut which rivaled my father's. He tried to be friends with everyone; he tried very hard, which is why he never succeeded. As far as I knew, no one had ever bought any of that great acid he had been selling all through June. He bummed a cigarette from me, let the smoke linger in his mouth like he was really enjoying it, and sat down on the bench beside the wooden table people were supposed to eat at. He leaned back, spread his legs, and draped his arms over the table; he looked like a spider. "I tell you, Bob ol' boy, it's fantastic. I smoked a sample last night." He leaned forward, nodded, and assumed the manner of a fifty-year-old executive. "Look, I just know you'll want some."

Trying to be nice, I said, "I spent all my money last weekend. That party at the Lutz's, you know."

"I know. I was there."

"Oh. I had forgotten. Well, uh, if you know, then you know. I ain't got no jack, and I ain't gonna get none until I get my check next week. Talk to me about it then."

He flipped his cigarette outside the wire fence into the parking lot and watched me work for about five minutes. Then his face assumed that slimy smile which always brought out the best in his yellow teeth. "I tell you what," he said, "I'm supposed to get the stuff at Cook's Cabin; that's where I always make my heavy connections. I'll leave a few joints in there for you tonight, 'cause I'm going straight to Richlands to get me a piece of ass." He chuckled and did a poor imitation of Groucho.

"You?"

He didn't answer. "I'm going to have to get rid of this stuff fast because I think my parents are catching on. So pick them up, will you? If you vouch for it, then everybody else will know it's okay."

I wanted to ask Jack if he thought the police were watching him; I knew the sheriff couldn't be as dumb as we thought. But before I could do so, he slapped me on the shoulder and told me he had to be going. "You will get them, won't you?"

"Yeah, I guess," I said, not knowing whether I would or not.

He left, driving over the gravel road at forty m.p.h., raising dust everywhere. I thought bad thoughts about him, then promptly thought about other things.

Later on that day I sat at the bench in the same position Walker had; I was talking with Chip Anderson, a med student trainee at the Health Department, and with Ted Maxwell, the nicest redneck I ever met. Ted was a cadet at the state college, but I rarely saw him unless we were both in Blackton; he was lanky, with short black hair and an accent that made me sound as if I had come from the English stage. Chip had thick glasses and wiry brown hair covering his ears; he was twenty pounds overweight and still had complexion problems. After we had discussed various topics for a while, Chip started talking about alcohol again; he compared it to the feeling people were supposed to get from grass. "I can't get high off grass," he said for the hundredth time. "Maybe if I tried some really powerful stuff. . . ."

Naturally that reminded me, and I related my conversation with Jack Walker.

"Why don't we go tonight?" asked Ted. "We got nothing else to do."

"Oh yeah, Ted?" asked Chip. "We gotta help my aunt move tonight."

Ted grimaced and said, "Well, I got another idea. Why doesn't Bob

go and get the joints? If the stuff is good, we'll buy a few ounces and get Chip so stoned he won't be able to talk."

I said I would go.

At seven I borrowed the car and drove to Cook's Cabin; the radio was loud, but then the station played a song I hated, so I turned it off. The sun was sinking behind a mountain; a thin greyness was settling over the countryside, although the sky was as blue as ever. I paid no attention to my driving; I knew every curve by heart and my mind was blank. I felt as if I was trying to think some thought new to me, a thought alien to my experience. I wondered if Blackton County was a dim dream. I was wasted inside; maybe I had been playing too hard and needed some rest. My eyes lingered over fragments of scenery; a cow chewing its cud and sticking its head over a barbed-wire fence; a junked Chevy in someone's front yard; the brick home of a girl I knew only passingly but always wanted to catch sight of. And other things I guess; I forgot them as soon as my mind wandered to something else.

Cook's Cabin was on a hill next to the forest, twenty yards from the highway leading toward Richlands. I don't know if it had ever been renovated or not; a silver marker with black letters called it a historic landmark—built by the first settlers of Blackton County two hundred years ago. Across the highway were fields reputed to have been an Indian burial ground.

I made a left turn into the shoulder next to the cabin and got out of the car. I felt nervous, but I ascribed that to my keen sense of paranoia; I told myself again that the police were not *that* dumb. I looked around to see if anyone was there; sometimes people were. A green picnic table was close to the cabin, presumably as a tourist attraction. I walked toward the cabin, trying to make it seem as if I was just wandering around for the benefit of any unseen eyes.

When I got inside I grimaced; it sure was a mess. Dust and litter were stacked in the corners. I ran my fingers across a log and wiped them on my blue jeans. It was only a one room cabin, and a genuine historic site at that; I wondered why the county didn't hire someone to sweep it up once or twice a year. There were no joints in the middle of the floor; I gave Jack credit for having some brains. My wasted feeling strengthened; I pretended it wasn't there by humming that song

I hated. It didn't work, and I felt even more like I was part of a dream. The new thought inside me continued its attempts to take shape. I wondered why I felt someone was with me. I walked to the corner closest to the door; naturally Jack hadn't put the grass there. And just as naturally I found it in the fourth corner, underneath the biggest stack of litter in the cabin. Three joints. I told myself that it was lucky I had plenty of practice driving around stoned, but that thought didn't seem real either. Only the urge to light up and get spaced out was real. I chuckled at my keen sense of paranoia, coming and going at its own leisure. Outside the sky was darkening more quickly than usual; only a few cars were passing by. I sat down, thinking that my jeans had to be washed anyway, and lit up. It was good stuff; Jack had finally impressed me.

Suddenly everything changed. I wasn't stoned like I was supposed to be. My head didn't whirl; my eyelids didn't feel heavy; the whish of the passing cars didn't drag out at a louder volume. I was aware of the dampening air, the coming darkness, of the thought finally nearing its final shape. It did not occur to me to fight any of this. It was not like I was engaged in a battle for my sanity. It seemed natural. It was right that I should yield to the thought, that I should surrender to the forces molding me.

The cars whishing by were a quiet fragment of sound, holding no meaning for me. I doubted that when I left the cabin, I would see my car. My brother didn't exist; Chip and Ted didn't exist; my parents and our house didn't exist. Only Cook's Cabin was real. All else was a mist.

The thought formed, yet I could not think of words to describe it. I saw her.

She was a wisp of yellow smoke swirling in front of my eyes. A wisp with sex, emotion, and intellect. Now that the thought had formed and had changed me, she too could form. It seemed as if she had two arms reaching toward me, that she had pleading eyes, that she had waited for me and no others. I wanted to dismiss my impressions of her; she should have been only a figment of my imagination, yet she was real. The longer she swirled, becoming more than a wisp, the heavier the thought felt in my brain, the emptier my stomach felt. Again, it did not occur to me to fight; she was a siren, and I belonged to her.

Without thinking I lit another joint. I held the smoke in my lungs

as long as I could. The world, the tiny world swayed back and forth as she shaped. The darkness from outside covered me, but she was light.

She formed.

She formed, she was real, she was a person; yet I could not touch her, I could not see her features, I could not smell her. I had only the thought to guide me, and the thought told me she was brightness and love, greyness and pain. The thought told me that she was beautiful, and I wondered if she had yellow or black hair, green or blue eyes, large or small breasts, long or short legs, dark or pale skin. She was one woman; she was all women. I was about to try to dismiss her presence as a mere vision, a juvenile impression somehow brought about by the grass, when I heard her speak in a voice that was both frightened and calm, impetuous and well-rehearsed.

She said simply, "Help me."

At that point she was in such complete control of me I felt as if my pride should have been damaged. But I was too busy being sorry for her. All of a sudden I knew I would help her no matter what the cost to myself.

"Please! You must help me."

I didn't know if I had really heard her voice or not, but that didn't matter to me. I spoke. Not aloud, but somewhere in my mind. I asked her many things, most of them obvious—who was she, where had she come from, and what was her danger. The thought told me not to be concerned with such trivialities. I realized that her voice also belonged to the thought; it had in it all colors, all fears, all feelings.

"You are the only person who can help. Don't you want to help? You must; you must help!"

I wanted the thought to give me a reply. There were no more sounds from the highway and I wanted to stand up to look and see if Blackton County was still there. The thought jerked my attention from my surroundings, but did not tell me what to say.

"You're the only one who can help. I know you are. I knew the others could not help, but I had to do something. I had to do something while I was waiting for you. You can help! Please help!"

But the thought would give me no course of action. I was its pawn, and it wanted me to do something. But it would not allow me to move from my position on the floor.

She stopped paying attention to me. I was afraid that she had given up and would go away forever. I sensed her looking out the window, staring at something frightening her. I wanted to look with her, but the thought would not let me move my head.

"Listen to those screams! They see those savages coming! The screams! The screams!"

The thought told me that there were indeed screams, but I could not hear them. I wanted to convince her that I was trying to hear, but I didn't know how.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Then she turned toward me. "How can you just sit there and watch them murder Daddy? You've already let them kill Mommy and my brothers! And we did nothing to them, nothing! How can you just sit there?"

The thought told me that she had broken contact with me; she would no longer speak to me. Neither would she let me go. I saw her form shrink; she was falling to her knees and burying her face in her hands. I wanted to touch her, but the thought told me that if I tried, she would disappear. I decided not to touch her because I wanted her to be with me.

When she raised her head, it was not to look at me. She was becoming a wisp again. I sensed her opening her mouth to scream, and I could imagine what her scream would be like. I tensed myself, hoping to shut it out of my mind, but the scream never came.

It was over fast; the yellow wisp was suddenly gone and I was alone in the blackness.

I don't know how long I sat there. My eyes were closed most of the time and I concentrated on my wasted feeling. The remaining joint had been crushed in my fist, but I couldn't summon any sorrow for it. And the thought was still there. The thought, whatever it was supposed to represent after her going, would always be with me; that didn't make me feel any less lonely.

Finally I left Cook's Cabin and walked toward the car; my movements were made without desire because I didn't care if I ever got home or not. The sky was clear, the stars were sparkling, but in the distance a silver fog hung over the mountains. Glancing at the fields across the highway—those reputed to have been the Indian burial grounds—startled me for some reason. I realized that the fields were

fertile, good for planting crops. Then I knew what she and her family had done to the Indians, why they had been slaughtered. I leaned on my car and smoked a cigarette, keeping my mind as blank as possible.

When I woke up (with a headache) the next morning I wanted to continue my life as before, as if it had all been a dream. I opened my eyes to see a yellow wisp in front of me. I waved my hand and it was gone. My vision was not over, I realized as I took a couple of aspirin in the bathroom; and on top of that, something important had been taken from me; something had been pushed out of my brain by the thought. I cursed outloud, just as my mother passed the bathroom. She glared at me and spoke my name in anger.

"Uh, sorry, Mom."

"Well? What's the matter?"

"Uh, nothing."

"Nothing," she said, tapping her foot. "Come and get your breakfast." She walked toward the kitchen.

I didn't eat much. I drank some orange juice and left for the pool a little early because my father tried to talk to me about what I was going to do when I got out of school. Despite the fact that I saw the yellow wisp while he spoke, I remained non-committal, as usual.

And as usual, the morning sun was very bright. Sometimes it was hidden from me by the tree next to the highway, but not often enough to suit me. Once the sunlight changed into that yellow wisp and I almost wrecked the car; fortunately the police weren't anywhere around. After that I looked for my sunglasses beside me on the seat and couldn't find them; they were either at home or lost. Not looking forward to spending the whole day squinting my eyes, I stopped at a drug store and bought a new pair with yellow-orange lenses. I hoped that Jack Walker wouldn't see me and ask where my money had come from.

Jack Walker; I had a few things to say to him.

Twenty minutes after I arrived at the pool, thick grey and white clouds rolled from the mountains in the west. They rolled until they covered the whole sky. I sat on the table with my feet on the bench and twirled my sunglasses. Every once in awhile, when I wasn't seeing the yellow wisp and when the few people at the pool were out of hearing range, I said, "Come on out, you bastard. Come on out."

Chip and Ted arrived late that afternoon, earlier than usual because Chip had left the Health Department without permission.

"Well? Is it good?" asked Ted.

"Yeah, it's gotta be good because I don't want to spend good poker money on something that's not gonna get me high," said Chip.

"How was moving?" I asked, not really interested.

"It sucked," said Ted. "How's the dope?"

"Uh, it's good. We'll have to make sure Walker gives us some of the same shit though." There wasn't much enthusiasm in my voice.

"Yeah," said Chip. "I wouldn't trust him with nothing."

"How good?" asked Ted.

"For Christ's sake, it's good!"

Ted smiled and lit my cigarette. "Well, you don't have to get bitchy about it. Peace, love, and all that shit."

"Yeah," I said. "Seen Walker today?"

"No," said Chip, "but I imagine that Scrooge will be here soon enough."

Walker was at the pool twenty minutes later, after I had to suffer through the yellow wisp twice more and Ted telling me about how Chip had dropped a table, stepped into a box of expensive china, and had been jilted by his ugly second cousin. When Walker saw us, he "trucked on up," looking like the silly animation I had seen once in an Italian movie about Sinbad. "Do you want some?" he asked. "Do you want some?"

"Must you wear that damn shirt?" I asked.

"We want some," said Ted.

"Yeah. How much?" said Chip.

Walker cited the going price for dope. Ted cursed and muttered something about inflation being everywhere these days.

"What's in it?" I asked. "Any angel dust?"

"No. I wish there was," replied Walker, smiling.

"You sure?" I asked. "I mean, you better not be lying or nothing." I was sitting on my hands because I didn't want to use them. The thought was telling me that he was telling the truth, and I had given up fighting people because I didn't like their looks long ago.

"I'm sure. Nothing but good, fresh, healthy dope. Some of the best."

I didn't know how much Chip and Ted bought. I didn't get any, myself.

The next day I didn't have to work, so I watched quiz shows, soap operas, and Mike Douglas. I also ate a lot of popcorn. I enjoyed watching TV because I was able to ignore to some extent the thought buzzing around in my head. The yellow wisp didn't bother me as much either; I didn't even adjust the color on the set when it came. Outside clouds still covered the sky; I looked once or twice. The temperature was lower than usual, and when chills ran up and down my body, I closed the windows. There was a lot of smoke in the living room after that.

At about four o'clock Bill Roberts called me. I had seen him only once or twice this summer, but I used to hang around with him when I was in high school and he was in college. He was a strange boy who grew up to be an even stranger young man. Long ago he wanted to be a writer, and I had to listen to him talk for hours about the big parties he would go to in New York, about how he would tell Norman Mailer what he really thought of him, and about how all his books would be on the best-seller lists. And he was smart; I couldn't believe it. Once I asked him an innocent question about who in the world Oliver Goldsmith was; he delivered a long lecture about him being an ugly poet. Bill also used to talk about how he was going to leave Blackton, just as soon as he graduated from college. He was going to go to New York, get a job somewhere, and write. For some reason it never happened; occasionally he had written a few things and sent them off, but they didn't sell. Then he just gave up. Threw his arms up in the air and said to heck with it. Went to work for the Health Department.

Anyway, he called to tell me that his folks had asked him to take some clothes and books to his sister in Richlands and he wanted to know if I would go along. Since Chip and Ted were smoking that dope and I didn't particularly want to, I said I would.

He picked me up at six. Bill was putting on a gut. With those Arrow shirts and clean blue jeans, and with that black hair dangling over the top of his ears, he looked like he was already married, and liking it, even though he wasn't supposed to marry Jenna Hughes for another six months. His face was puffy and round and he was clean-shaven. I liked him better when he was thin and dressed in rags like a true freak and three days' stubble was on his chin and his eyes always looked like they were about to drill into something. During those days he looked

like someone who just might become a great author. But there was nothing I could do about that. He was still a nice guy.

For a few minutes we didn't say much. The yellow wisp was in front of me and the thought was still buzzing around; what it was trying to say I didn't know, didn't care. Funny; I was beginning to feel like I was a comrade with Bill again, for the first time in years. He cursed some old woman who pulled out in front of him at an intersection and I forced a laugh. He turned on the radio, asked me to light a cigarette for him, and said, "Well, Bob ol' boy, what's you been doing with yourself?"

"Getting stoned. Lounging around. The usual." I was uncomfortable because we were going to pass Cook's Cabin soon, but I tried not to show it.

"Yeah. Same here." He took the cigarette I was handing him.

"Been doing any writing?" I don't know why I asked that; I didn't know if that was the right thing to say or not. If it was wrong, he didn't show it. He said:

"No. I don't read much anymore either. I just get drunk with Jenna on weekends at her father's cabin in Thompson Valley."

"How come you don't write?" I used to enjoy pumping him because he had always been quick with the Christ-figure answers. Now I was acting toward him as I had several years ago, when we had been close, and the only reason I had for doing so was the notion that he might understand if he knew what I was going through. I still wanted to help the girl I had seen last night.

"Not much point to it." He sped up around a curve so his tires would squeal; they did and he chuckled, squinting his eyes in the setting sun, which had just come out of the clouds.

It was good to see sunlight, even if it was fogged by that yellow mist. The grass next to the highway flicked by me, and I watched it until we passed a hitchhiker with long hair; I flipped him the finger, just for the fun of it. Bill saw me do it and laughed. "Remember when we used to shoot moons?" he asked.

"I shot 'em. You always drove because you were so damn shy."

"Something like that." He repeated the words, as if saying them again somehow gave them more meaning. Maybe it did.

"How come you stayed here in Blackton? I always expected you to leave and you never did. How come?"

Bill didn't answer until we neared Cook's Cabin and the burial grounds. He took his foot off the gas and looked to his left, to the cabin on the hill. Twilight was coming, and the cabin seemed as if it were now a dream, and everything else (but the wisp and the thought) was real.

"I just wanted to stay," Bill said. "I figured that anything I could do away, I could do here. And Mom and Dad need me. Jenna needs me." He paused for a moment, waiting until we couldn't see Cook's Cabin for the curves, and said, "And maybe somebody else will need me. I couldn't leave knowing she might need me."

I let it hang there for a moment, but I couldn't let it hang for too long. I thought I knew whom he was talking about, and I had to be sure. After a moment I asked him who.

He flicked his cigarette out the window. "You know who as well as I do, Bob ol' boy. You're one of us now. I sensed it this morning."

I guessed my mouth dropped open. I wanted to say something else, but instead I slumped down in my seat and lit a cigarette for myself. I realized what had been taken away from me; the wasted feeling the thought carried with it would be with me for the rest of my life in Blackton County.

As we drove in silence toward Richlands, I allowed myself to think of the many things I had tried to ignore since the night before. I thought of the girl in the cabin, and I wondered how many more times she would try to find someone who could save her. I wondered how it felt to die again and again and again. And I wondered how many more people there were like Bill and me.

Biographical

ROBERT AICKMAN is the grandson of popular novelist Richard Marsh, and in his own right one of the modern masters of the British ghost story. A drama and film critic, he has been active with (among other societies) London Opera Society Ltd., Northampton Drama Club, The Inland Waterways Association (which he founded), as well as numerous programs and festivals of the arts. His books include *We Are for the Dark* (with Elizabeth Jane Howard), *The Late Breakfasters* and a forthcoming collection of weird fiction, *Cold Hand in Mine*. He has edited the *Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories* and its successors. He is interested in psychic phenomena and his attitude toward the occult suffuses such stories as "Ringing the Changes" and "The Real Road to the Church" with a conviction all too rare among writers of the macabre.

A. A. ATTANASIO writes "I have been piloting the one wing of the tongue since my early childhood in Newark, New Jersey. However, I don't write often. I've found that too much fantasy hoists my corporeal anchors like stolen smiles. Besides, writing puts the pry to my oyster-head, and I usually find no pearls inside—just the black muscles of my ego. I prefer spending my time climbing mountains, playing the dulcimer, or exercising my pet iguanas. I am currently living in New York City where I divide my time between studies at Columbia and tending bar at *The Club Foot* in the Bowery." In spite of the small number of his published stories, Mr. Attanasio has garnered not only the awe of those editors fortunate enough to purchase his work, but a growing and admiring circle of readers.

DENYS VAL BAKER is one of that number of modern masters of the British horror story which includes Robert Aickman and Basil Copper. His first collection of exclusively macabre tales was *The Face in the Mirror*, from Arkham House.

BRIAN BALL is perhaps best-known as the author of such popular science fiction novels as *The Probability Man* and *Planet Probability*. His 1974 horror novel, *The Venomous Serpent* was published in an American paperback edition under the title *The Night Creature*.

JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN (1918-) was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, but raised in New Haven. He has edited *Essence*, a magazine of poetry, and *Macabre*, magazine devoted to the fantastic. His published collections of verse include *Heart of Earth*, *The Humming Stair*, *The Wind of Time* and *Nightmare Need*. He is also the author of four collections of macabre stories: *Nine Horrors and a Dream*, *The Dark Returners*, *Scream at Midnight* and *Stories of Darkness and Dread*.

RAMSEY CAMPBELL (1946-) is one of the most respected of the younger writers of the macabre. His first work, under the influence of H. P. Lovecraft, resulted in a notable collection, *The Inhabitant of the Lake and Less Welcome Tenants*, published when he was only 18. His most recent work is free of Lovecraftian elements and suggests a career as creative as that of any writer in the field. He is also the author of the collection, *Demons by Daylight*.

LIN CARTER is well known for his science fiction novels, most of which pastiche the adventure writings of Robert E. Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs, and also as the editor of Ballantine's lamented Adult Fantasy Series. He is the author of the non-fiction work titled *H. P. Lovecraft: A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos*.

ARTHUR BYRON COVER (1950-) was born in Grundy, Virginia. When he was five his parents moved to Tazewell County, which provides the model for Blackton County in his story, "Lifeguard." He has sold stories to *Last Dangerous Visions*, *Alternities*, *The Alien Con-*

dition and *Infinity*, and interviews to the science fiction magazine *Vertex*. His first novel, *Autumn Angels* was sold to Pyramid Books as part of the Harlan Ellison Discovery Series. He writes, "I enjoy writing horror stories, since they are my only opportunity for social realism. The novel I sold . . . is a wildly experimental, surreal, comic, serious weird thing which bears absolutely no relationship to the world today."

WALTER C. DEBILL JR. (1939-) became a Lovecraft fan at 13 but for some reason waited until he was 29 before he started writing. He writes, "Mr. Derleth's acceptance of 'In 'Ygiroth' in April, 1971 was my very first acceptance for fiction. I was very self-conscious about replying, and after much fretting about whether to be businesslike or informal, brash or reserved, I wrote an embarrassingly spontaneous expression of my feelings at this once-in-a-lifetime thrill and went on to congratulate him warmly on the long-awaited popular recognition of HPL's work, then blossoming in paperback. Three months later [Derleth] was gone." The story, originally intended for *The Arkham Collector*, is printed here for the first time.

DAVID DRAKE (1945-) has appeared in previous Arkham House anthologies, including *Travellers by Night* and *Dark Things*, as well as *The Arkham Collector* and *Galaxy*.

SCOTT EDELSTEIN (1954-) has appeared in many anthologies and magazines but is probably best known to readers of *Vertex*. Still a student at Oberlin University, he has served on the editorial staffs of *Witchcraft & SORCERY* and *Eternity Science Fiction*, and is editing a series of science fiction anthologies for Aurora Books. He is at work on his first novel.

DAVID A. ENGLISH was one of the best known science fiction fans of the 1950s, producing a series of remarkable and creative cartoons for various fan magazines. More recently he has turned to writing and produced notable stories for several magazines, especially *Witchcraft & SORCERY*.

G. N. GABBARD (1941-) was born in Arkansas and attended M.I.T. and the University of Texas (Austin), ending up with a Ph.D. in Middle English and Middle Scots literature. He is the author of something in the neighborhood of 40 poems and a dozen articles, and a notable scholar of the fantasy author James Branch Cabell. He currently lives in Reno, Nevada.

ROBERT E. GILBERT (1924-) lives in Jonesboro, Tennessee, and is widely known among readers of science fiction fan magazines as an illustrator who has contributed more than a thousand line drawings to various such publications. His fiction has appeared in many magazines, among them *Fantasy Book*, *Infinity*, *Planet*, *Fantastic Universe* and *Galaxy*. He has published non-fiction dealing with art. His present story, he cautions, is not intended to be considered as fantasy but as a realistic portrayal of a mind undergoing collapse.

STEPHEN GOLDIN published the first Angel in Black stories in the lamented *Magazine of Horror*; it is to be hoped that the one in *Nameless Places* augurs a return for this welcome series. Mr. Goldin has also appeared in *Galaxy*, *If* and several anthologies, including *Generation* and *Best SF: 68*. He edited one anthology, *The Alien Condition*, and is currently concentrating on the writing of novels.

CARL JACOBI (1908-), a longtime staff member of the *Minneapolis Star* was introduced to readers of *Weird Tales* with the contest-winning "Mive" published in 1932. He has contributed to a variety of magazines, among them *Strange Stories*, *Amazing Stories*, *Railroad Stories*, *MacLean's Magazine*, *Thrilling Mystery*, *Short Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *The Toronto Star*, *If*, *Galaxy*, *Ghost Stories* and *Fantastic Universe*. Many of his stories have been anthologized. His short story collections are *Revelations in Black*, *Portraits in Moonlight* and *Disclosures in Scarlet*.

BRIAN LUMLEY (1937-) was called by August Derleth one of the few writers who was successful at pastiching Lovecraft. He was born in Horden, County Durham, England, and is a professional military man. He has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*,

The Arkham Collector, Witchcraft & SORCERY, Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos and *Dark Things*, and been reprinted in *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. He is the author of a collection, *The Caller of the Black* and the novels, *Beneath the Moors* and *The Burrowers Beneath*.

BOB MAURUS (1941-) was born in Brooklyn, but raised in rural Massachusetts. He is currently living in Atlanta where he is studying at the Atlanta College of Art. "The Stuff of Heroes" is his first published story, although his work as a fantasy illustrator will be familiar to readers of *Witchcraft & SORCERY*. He is married and has two daughters.

GARY MYERS (1952-) lives in California. His *The House of the Worm*, a book-length pastiche of Lovecraft and Dunsany, published recently by Arkham House, is his first book. Stories by him first appeared in *The Arkham Collector*, where they attracted attention for a level of creativity rare in pastiche.

GERALD W. PAGE (1939-) has spent most of his life in Atlanta, Georgia, where he is currently employed as a programming editor by *TV Guide* magazine, and also edits the fantasy magazine *Witchcraft & SORCERY*. His fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *New Writings in SF*, *Space: 1*, *Famous Science Fiction*, *Metro*, *Startling Mystery*, *Magazine of Horror*, *Spaceway* and *Small Steps*, *Giant Leaps*. His story here is part of a projected story-cycle.

E. HOFFMANN PRICE (1898-) was a full time professional writer during the heyday of the pulps, selling to most of the major titles. Soldier, adventurer and raconteur extraordinary, he now lives in San Francisco where he is at work on his memoirs. He was a close friend of *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright and many of that magazine's major contributors, and the only person ever to meet both Robert E. Howard and H. P. Lovecraft (with whom he collaborated on "Through the Gates of the Silver Key"). His fantasy fiction has appeared in *Weird Tales*, *Unknown*, *Strange Tales*, *Fantastic Universe* and *Witchcraft & SORCERY*, where he also publishes a regular column of reminiscences, "The Jade Pagoda." His previous collection was *Strange Gateways*, and a new one, *Far Lands, Other Days*, has been announced by Carcosa.

JOSEPH F. PUMILIA (1945-) is a native of Houston, where he still lives. A journalist who has worked on a number of small papers around Houston, he sold his first story in 1970. His work has appeared in several science fiction magazines and anthologies including *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*.

THOMAS BURNETT SWANN (1928-) is one of the major living American fantasists. A native of Florida, where he currently resides, his first fiction appeared in *Fantastic Universe*, but it was in the British magazine *Science Fantasy* that he attracted initial attention. He has since appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Fantastic*. He is the author of two published collections of fantasy, *The Dolphin and the Deep* and *Where is the Bird of Fire?* and numerous novels including *Wolfwinter*, *Day of the Minotaur*, *The Forest of Forever*, *The Goat Without Horns*, *Moondust*, *How Are the Mighty Fallen*, *Green Phoenix* and *The Not-World*. He has also written several volumes of poetry and criticism.

Four thousand copies of this book have been printed by The Lakeside Press, R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, from Linotype Garamond composed by Fox Valley Typesetting, Menasha, Wis., and printed on the Cameron book production system on 55# Dontext. The binding cloth is Holliston Black Novelex.

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(Continued from front flap)

Humor is present in the work of two newcomers: *More Things* by G. N. Gabbard and *The Stuff of Heroes* by Bob Maurus. *In the Land of Angra Mainyu* is one of Stephen Goldin's popular "Angel in Black" stories. David A. English is represented by the compelling *Simaitha* and Gerald W. Page by *Worldsong*, complete in itself, though part of a new story cycle. David Drake is on hand with two very different stories, and Brian Lumley's many admirers will be delighted with *What Dark God?* The concluding work to this volume, *Lifeguard* by Arthur Byron Cover, is a highly effective ghost story.

For those readers who are connoisseurs as well as those just discovering the joys of the macabre, these stories will serve as signposts pointing to hidden places of the mind and spirit, lands whose treasures are cold grue and horror, whimsy and fantasy, terror and discovery.

GERALD W. PAGE

Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Gerald Page spent most of his early years in Atlanta, Georgia. He has been interested in fantastic fiction as long as he can remember and became active in science fiction fan circles in 1954. In 1963 his first story appeared in John Campbell's *Analog* and soon after he began publishing fantasy and science fiction in a variety of American and British magazines and anthologies. In 1970 he became editor of *Witchcraft & SORCERY*, the magazine previously known as *Coven 13*. He has been employed for several years as a programming editor in *TV Guide's* Atlanta office; teaches a course in Modern Science Fiction at the Atlanta College of Art; and is script editor for Starlight Productions, Inc., which is currently preparing a science fiction series for educational television. He is at work on a novel, expanded from his short story *Mercyship*, part of his proposed tetralogy *The Human Way*, which will include the story cycle represented in this volume by *Worldsong*.

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